

KAREN KINGSBURY

A movie poster for the film 'Donker dag in September'. The top half features the name 'KAREN KINGSBURY' in a large, black, serif font. Below the name, on the left, is a close-up of a young man with light brown, spiky hair and blue eyes, looking off to the side with a serious expression. Behind him, a German Shepherd dog is visible, looking in the same direction. The background is a hazy city skyline at dusk or dawn. On the right side, there is a depiction of a building on fire with bright orange flames and thick black smoke rising into the air. In the center-right, there is a quote in Afrikaans in a smaller, italicized font. At the bottom, the title 'DONKER DAG IN SEPTEMBER' is written in a large, red, serif font with a white outline.

*Hy moet eers
'n manier kry
om sy eie hartseer
te verwerk ...*

'N
**DONKER DAG
IN
SEPTEMBER**

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Forever in Fiction®

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

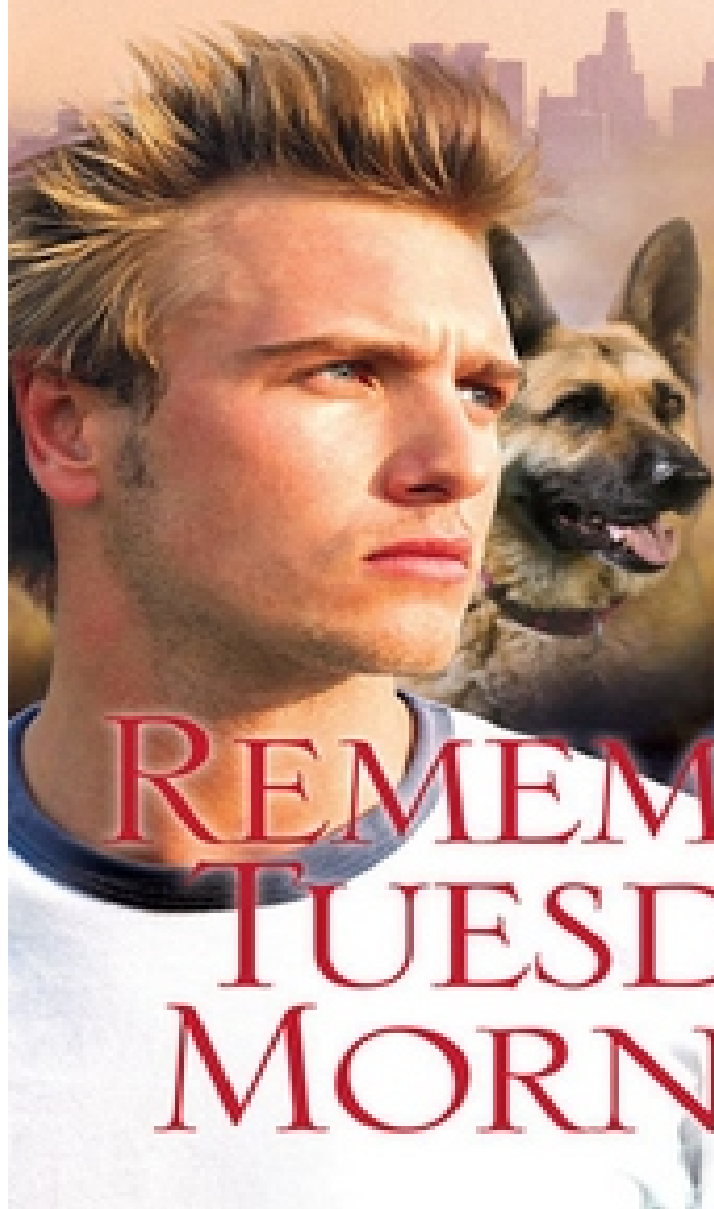
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KAREN KINGSBUR

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR



*He's on a desperate mission
to rid the city of evil
but first he must journey
to deal with his past*

9/

REMEMBER TUESDAY MORNING

KAREN KINGSBUR

*Hy moe
'n manie
om sy eie han
te verwe*

'N
DONKER DA
IN
SEPTEMBE

KAREN
KINGSBURY

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

REMEMBER
TUESDAY
MORNING

Previously published as *Every Now & Then*



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2012 Christelike Uitgewersmaatskappy
Posbus 1599, Vereeniging, 1930

Eerste uitgawe 2012

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DEDICATION

To Donald, my Prince Charming ...

How I rejoice to see you coaching again, sharing your gift of teaching and your uncanny basketball ability with another generation of kids — and best yet, now our boys are part of the mix. Isn't this what we always dreamed of, my love? I love sitting back this time and letting you and God figure it out. I'll always be here — cheering for you and the team from the bleachers. But God's taught me a thing or two about being a coach's wife. He's so good that way. It's fitting that you would find varsity coaching again now — after twenty years of marriage. Hard to believe that as you read this, our twentieth anniversary has come and gone. I look at you and I still see the blond, blue-eyed guy who would ride his bike to my house and read the Bible with me before a movie date. You stuck with me back then and you stand by me now — when I need you more than ever. I love you, my husband, my best friend, my Prince Charming. Stay with me, by my side, and let's watch our children take wing, savoring every memory and each day gone by. Always and always ... The ride is breathtakingly beautiful, my love. I pray it lasts far into our twilight years. Until then, I'll enjoy not always knowing where I end and you begin. I love you always and forever.

To Kelsey, my precious daughter ...

You are nineteen now, a young woman, and my heart soars with joy when I see all that you are, all you've become. This year is a precious one for us because you're still home, attending junior college and spending nearly every day in the dance studio. When you're not dancing, you're helping out with the business and ministry of Life-Changing Fiction TM — so we have many precious hours together. I know this time is short and won't last, but I'm enjoying it so much — you, no longer the high school girl, a young woman and in every way my daughter, my friend. That part will always stay, but you, my sweet girl, will go where your dreams lead, soaring through the future doors God opens. Honey, you grow more beautiful — inside and out — every day. And always I treasure the way you talk to me, telling me your hopes and

dreams and everything in between. I can almost sense the plans God has for you, the very good plans. I pray you keep holding on to His hand as He walks you toward them. I love you, sweetheart.

To Tyler, my lasting song ...

I can hardly wait to see what this school year will bring for you, my precious son. Last year you were one of Joseph's brothers, and you were Troy Bolton, and Captain Hook — becoming a stronger singer and stage actor with every role. This year you'll be at a new high school, where I believe God will continue to shape you as the leader He wants you to be. Your straight A's last year were a sign of things to come, and I couldn't be prouder, Ty. I know it was hard watching Kelsey graduate, knowing that your time with your best friend is running short. But you'll be fine, and no matter where God leads you in the future, the deep and lasting relationships you've begun here in your childhood will remain. Thank you for the hours of music and song. As you seize hold of your sophomore year, I am mindful that the time is rushing past, and I make a point to stop and listen a little longer when I hear you singing. I'm proud of you, Ty, of the young man you're becoming. I'm proud of your talent and your compassion for people and your place in our family. However your dreams unfold, I'll be in the front row to watch them happen. Hold on to Jesus, Ty. I love you.

To Sean, my happy sunshine ...

Today you came home from school, eyes sparkling, and showed me your science notebook — all your meticulous neat sentences and careful drawings of red and white blood cells and various bones and bacteria. I was marveling over every page, remarking at the time you'd taken and the quality of your work, and together we laughed over the fact that neither of us really cares too much for science — but that it still matters that we do our best. You smiled that easy smile of yours and said, "Wait till you see Josh's — his blows mine away." You didn't know it at the time, but I was very touched by the tone in your voice. You weren't envious or defeated by the fact that Josh — in your same grade — might have managed to draw even more detailed pictures in his science journal. You were merely happy that you'd done your best, earned your A, and could move on from seventh grade science proud of your effort. I love that about you, Sean. You could easily sulk in the shadow of your brother, a kid who excels in so many areas that the two of you share. But you also excel, my dear son. And one of the best ways you shine is in your happy heart, your great love for life and for people, and your constant joy.

Sean, you have a way of bringing smiles into our family, even in the most mundane moments, and lately we are smiling very big about your grades. I pray that God will use your positive spirit to always make a difference in the

lives around you. You're a precious gift, Son. Keep smiling and keep seeking God's best for your life. I love you, honey.

To Josh, my tenderhearted perfectionist ...

So, you finally did it! You can beat me at ping-pong now, not that I'm surprised. God has given you great talents, Josh, and the ability to work at them with the sort of diligent determination that is rare in young teens. Whether in football or soccer, track or room inspections, you take the time to seek perfection. Along with that, there are bound to be struggles. Times when you need to understand again that the gifts and talents you bear are God's, not yours, and times when you must learn that perfection isn't possible for us, only for God. Even so, my heart almost bursts with pride over the young man you're becoming. After one of your recent soccer tournaments, one of the parents said something I'll always remember: "Josh is such a leader," she told me. "Even when he doesn't know other parents are looking, he's always setting an example for his teammates." The best one, of course, is when you remind your teammates to pray before a game. What a legacy you and your brothers are creating here in Washington State. You have an unlimited future ahead of you, Josh, and I'll forever be cheering on the sidelines. Keep God first in your life. I love you always.

To EJ, my chosen one ...

Here you are in the early months of seventh grade, and I can barely recognize the student athlete you've become. Those two years of home schooling with Dad continue to reap a harvest a hundred times bigger than what was sown, and we couldn't be prouder of you. But even beyond your grades, we are blessed to have you in our family for so many reasons. You are wonderful with our pets — always the first to feed them and pet them and look out for them — and you are a willing worker when it comes to chores. Besides all that, you make us laugh — oftentimes right out loud. I've always believed that getting through life's little difficulties and challenges requires a lot of laughter — and I thank you for bringing that to our home. You're a wonderful boy, Son, a child with such potential. Clearly, that's what you displayed the other day when you came out of nowhere in your soccer qualifiers and scored three goals. I'm amazed because you're so talented in so many ways, but all of them pale in comparison to your desire to truly live for the Lord. I'm so excited about the future, EJ, because God has great plans for you, and we want to be the first to congratulate you as you work to discover those. Thanks for your giving heart, EJ. I love you so.

To Austin, my miracle boy ...

I smile when I picture you hitting not one home run, but *three* last baseball

season — all of them for Papa — and I feel my heart swell with joy as I think of what happened after your second home run, when you had rounded the bases one at a time and accepted congratulations at home plate from your entire team. You headed into the dugout, and a couple of your teammates tugged on your arm. “Tell us, Austin ... how do you do it? How do you hit a home run like that?” That’s when you smiled and shrugged your shoulders. “Easy. I asked God for the strength to hit the ball better than I could without Him.” Papa must be loving every minute of this, Aus. I’m sure of it. What I’m not sure of is whether missing him will ever go away. I can only tell you that our quiet times together are what I love most too. Those, and our times of playing give-and-go out on the basketball court. You’re my youngest, my last, Austin. I’m holding on to every moment, for sure. Thanks for giving me so many wonderful reasons to treasure today. I thank God for you, for the miracle of your life. I love you, Austin.

And to God Almighty, the Author of Life, who has — for now — blessed me with these.

Opgedra aan

Donald, my prins ...

Wat ’n vreugde is dit nie vir my om jou weer basketbal te sien afrig nie, jou liefde om mense te leer, jou geheimsinnige kennis wanneer jy ’n nuwe generasie moet afrig. En die beste van alles is dat ons seuns nou deel is daarvan. Is dit nie waarvan ons nog altyd gedroom het nie, my lief? Ek hou daarvan om hierdie keer agteroor te sit en jou en God alles te laat uitwerk. Ek sal altyd op die pawiljoen wees om jou en die span te ondersteun. Maar God het vir my ’n ding of twee geleer wanneer dit daarby kom om ’n afrigter se vrou te wees. Hy is so goed. Dit is gepas dat jy nou weer basketbal afrig by die universiteit, dít na twintig jaar se getroude lewe. Dit is moeilik om te glo dat, wanneer jy hierdie woorde lees, ons twintigste huwelikshedenking al verby sal wees. Wanneer ek na jou kyk, sien ek steeds die blondekop-ou met die blou oë wat met sy fiets na my huis toe gery het om saam met my Bybel te lees voordat ons gaan fliek. Jy het my destyds ondersteun, en jy moedig my vandag nog aan – juis nou dat ek jou nodiger as ooit het. Ek is lief vir jou, my man, my beste vriend, my prins. Bly by my, aan my sy. Kom ons kyk hoe ons kinders uit die nes vlieg. Soos altyd ... is die vlug asemrowend mooi. Ek bid dat dit tot diep in ons skemerjare sal voortduur. Tot dan sal ek my daarin verlustig om nooit presies te weet waar ek eindig en jy begin nie. Ek sal jou tot in ewigheid liefhê.

Kelsey, my kosbare dogter ...

Jy is nou negentien, 'n jong vrou, en my hart is vol vreugde wanneer ek na jou kyk, dit wat jy geword het. Dit is vir ons 'n kosbare jaar omdat jy steeds in die huis is, terwyl jy begin studeer het en byna elke dag in die dansstudio deurbring. Wanneer jy nie dans nie, help jy met die bediening van Life-Changing Fiction™; daarom bring ons kosbare tyd saam deur. Ek weet hierdie tydjie is kort en gaan nie vir ewig aanhou nie, maar ek geniet dit so baie – jy wat nie meer 'n hoërskoolmeisie is nie, maar 'n jong vrou en my dogter, my vriendin. Dit sal altyd so wees, maar jy, my liefste dogter, sal gaan waar jou drome jou lei, jy sal hoog vlieg deur die deure wat God vir jou in die toekoms open. Liefeling, jy word elke dag al hoe pragtiger, van binne en van buite. En ek sal altyd die manier waarop jy met my praat koester, wanneer jy my vertel van jou drome en alles en nog wat. Ek kan byna die planne aanvoel wat God vir jou het, die baie goeie planne. Ek bid dat jy altyd sy hand sal vashou terwyl julle dit saam tegemoetgaan. Ek is lief vir jou, my kind.

Tyler, my ewigdurende lied ...

Ek kan skaars wag om te sien wat hierdie skooljaar vir jou gaan inhou, my liewe seun. Verlede jaar was jy een van Josef se broers, en jy was Troy Bolton en Captain Hook, jy word 'n beter sanger en akteur met elke rol. Hierdie jaar gaan jy na 'n nuwe hoërskool en ek glo God sal aanhou om jou te vorm in die leier wat Hy wil hê jy moet wees. Jou goeie punte verlede jaar was 'n teken van dinge wat vir jou voorlê, en ek kan nie trotser wees nie, Ty. Ek weet dit was vir jou moeilik om te sien hoe Kelsey die hoërskool verlaat, omdat jy geweet het jou tyd saam met jou beste vriendin word al minder. Maar jy gaan oukei wees, en maak nie saak wat God se planne vir jou toekoms is nie, die hegte verhouding wat julle tydens jul kinderjare opgebou het, sal vir altyd voortduur. Dankie vir die ure van musiek en liedjies. Noudat jy in graad 10 is, besef ek die tyd vlieg verby en ek maak 'n punt daarvan om 'n paar oomblikke langer te staan en luister wanneer ek jou hoor sing. Ek is trots op jou, Ty, op die jong man wat jy besig is om te word. Ek is trots op jou talent en jou deernis met mense en jou plek in ons gesin. Hoe jou drome ook al ontvou, ek sal altyd in die heel voorste ry sit en kyk hoe hulle waar word. Hou vas aan Jesus, my seun. Ek is lief vir jou.

Sean, my sonskynkind ...

Vandag het jy ná skool huis toe gekom met oë wat blink, en vir my jou wetenskapboek gewys. Al jou noukeurig netjiese sinne en presiese tekeninge van rooi- en witbloedselle en verskillende bene en bakterieë. Ek het verwonderd na elke bladsy gekyk, genoem hoeveel tyd dit jou moes geneem het en van watter gehalte jou werk is, en saam het ons gelag oor die feit dat nie een van ons regtig in wetenskap belangstel nie, maar dat dit steeds belangrik is dat ons ons beste gee. Jy het daardie bekende glimlag van jou gegee en gesê: “Wag tot Ma Josh s'n sien, syne is nog beter as myne.” Jy het

dit nie toe geweet nie, maar jou stemtoon het my baie geraak. Jy het nie jaloers of soos 'n verloorder geklink oor die feit dat Josh, in dieselfde graad as jy, dalk selfs meer gedetailleerde prentjies in sy wetenskapboek geteken het nie. Jy was eenvoudig gelukkig dat jy jou beste gegee het, jou A verdien het, en graad 7-wetenskap trots agterlaat. Ek hou van hierdie eienskap van jou, Sean. Jy kon maklik in jou broer se skaduwee verdwyn het, iemand wat uitblink in soveel areas wat julle deel. Maar jy blink ook uit, my liewe seun. En een van die beste maniere waarop jy uitblink, is met jou gelukkige hart, jou groot liefde vir die lewe en mense, en jou konstante vreugde.

Sean, jy het die manier om glimlagte op ons gesin se gesigte te plaas, selfs in die onbenulligste oomblikke, en deesdae glimlag ons baie oor jou punte. Ek bid dat God jou positiewe houding sal gebruik om altyd 'n verskil te maak in die lewe van die mense rondom jou. Jy is 'n kosbare geskenk, my seun. Hou aan glimlag, en streef na God se beste vir jou lewe. Ek is lief vir jou, my seun.

Josh, my sagmoedige perfeksionis ...

Jy het dit uiteindelik reggekry! Jy wen my nou met tafeltennis ... maar ek is nie eintlik verras nie. God het vir jou baie talente gegee, Josh, die vermoë om dit te gebruik met die soort ywerige vasberadenheid wat skaars is by jong tieners. Of dit nou voetbal of sokker, atletiek of kamerinspeksie is, jy staan tyd daaraan af om alles perfek te doen. Dit bring noodwendig sekere struikelblokke. Tye wanneer jy weer moet verstaan dat jou gawes en talente God s'n is, nie joune nie, en tye wanneer jy moet leer dat volmaaktheid nie vir ons moontlik is nie, net vir God. Tog is ek baie trots oor die jong man wat jy besig is om te word. Ná een van jou onlangse sokkertoernooie, het een van die ouers iets gesê wat ek altyd sal onthou: "Josh is 'n ware leier," het sy vir my gesê. "Selfs al weet hy nie ander ouers kyk na hom nie, stel hy altyd 'n voorbeeld vir sy spanmaats." Die beste van alles is natuurlik wanneer jy jou spanmaats daaraan herinner om voor 'n wedstryd te bid. Watter nalatenskap laat jy en jou broers nie na hier in Washington nie. Jy het 'n eindelose toekoms voor jou, Josh, en ek sal jou altyd van die kantlyn af aanmoedig. Stel God altyd eerste in jou lewe. Ek is lief vir jou, vir altyd.

EJ, my uitverkore een ...

Die eerste paar maande van graad 7 is verby en ek herken skaars die atleet wat jy geword het. Daardie twee jaar saam met Pa en sy tuisonderrig hou aan om baie meer op te lewer as wat ons kon dink, en ons is so verskriklik trots op jou. Maar buiten vir jou goeie punte en jou natuurlike aanleg om jou maats op die regte pad te lei, is ons om soveel redes geseën om jou in ons gesin te hê. Jy is so goed met ons troeteldiere – altyd eerste om hulle kos te gee, te vertroetel en te versorg – en jy is 'n gewillige werker wanneer dit by huishoudelike take kom. Boonop laat jy ons lag – dikwels sommer kliphard.

Ek het nog altyd geglo 'n mens moet baie kan lag om deur die lewe se probleme en uitdagings te kan kom – en ek sê vir jou dankie dat jy vrolikheid in ons huis inbring. Jy is 'n wonderlike seun, 'n kind met soveel potensiaal. Dit is duidelik wat jy uitgebeeld het nou die dag toe jy uit die bloute drie doele aangeteken het tydens die sokkeruitdunne. Ek staan verstom voor jou vele talente, maar die meeste daarvan kan nie eens vergelyk word met jou opregte begeerte om vir die Here te leef nie. Ek is so opgewonde oor die toekoms, EJ, want God het groot planne vir jou. En ons wil die eerstes wees wat jou gelukwens wanneer jy hard daaraan werk om hierdie planne waar te maak. Dankie dat jy jou hart met ons deel, EJ. Ek is so lief vir jou.

Austin, my wonderwerk-kind ...

Ek glimlag wanneer ek my voorstel hoe jy verlede bofbalseisoen nie een boflopie nie, maar drie aangeteken het, almal vir Papa. En my hart is vol vreugde wanneer ek dink aan wat na jou tweede boflopie gebeur het, toe jy van die een bof ná die ander gehardloop het en by die laaste bof gelukgewens is deur jou hele span. Tydens rustyd het 'n paar van jou spanmaats jou aan die arm gepluk en gesê: “Austin, sê vir ons ... hoe doen jy dit? Hoe slaan 'n mens 'n boflopie soos dit?” Dit is toe dat jy geglimlag het en jou skouers opgetrek het: “Dis maklik. Ek vra God vir die krag om die bal beter te slaan as wat ek dit sonder Hom kan doen.” Papa geniet seker elke oomblik hiervan, Aus. Daarvan is ek seker. Iets waaroor ek nie seker is nie, is of die gemis ooit sal weggaan. Ek hou die meeste van ons stil tye saam; dit is spesiaal. Dié tye, asook wanneer ons saam basketbal speel. Jy is my jongste, my laaste, Austin. Ek klou verbete aan elke oomblik vas. Dankie dat jy vir my soveel wonderlike redes gee om vandag te koester. Ek sê vir God dankie vir jou, vir die wonderwerk van jou lewe. Ek is lief vir jou, Austin.

En aan God Almagtig, die Outeur van die lewe, wat my – vir eers – met hierdie mense geseën het.

FOREVER IN FICTION®

A special thanks to the Northern Cross Foundation and the Spica family who won Forever in Fiction®* at the Grand Rapids annual “Making it Home” Auction. The Spica family chose to honor their friend Dave Jacobs, age 58, by naming him Forever in Fiction. Dave is a pillar in his community, a man with many friends and much integrity and faith. He spent his younger years in social work, but then became involved in the Home Repair Services business — a venture devoted to helping the less fortunate in various Michigan neighborhoods.

Dave has won many awards for his philanthropic efforts, but remains deeply humble and committed to making life better for the people around him. His greatest accomplishments include his marriage to his wife, Lois, and their four children. He loves woodworking and bird-watching, and when he travels to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan with his family, he tries to do a little of both.

Dave’s character in *Remember Tuesday Morning* is that of the generous developer whose Oak Canyon Estates are the subject of threats by a radical environmental group. I could see Dave working in that role, commanding a team of construction workers and still finding time to be with family and friends, and making a difference in his community.

I pray that the Spica family sees their friend Dave deeply honored by their gift and by his placement in *Remember Tuesday Morning* and that they will always see a bit of Dave when they read his name in the pages of this novel, where he will be Forever in Fiction.

For those of you who are not familiar with Forever in Fiction, it is my way of involving you, the readers, in my stories, while raising money for charities. To date Forever in Fiction has raised more than \$100,000 at charity auctions across the country. If you are interested in having a Forever in Fiction package donated to your auction, contact my assistant, Tricia Kingsbury, at Kingsburydesk@aol.com. Please write *Forever in Fiction* in the subject line. Please note that I am only able to donate a limited number of these each year. For that reason, I have set a fairly high minimum bid on this package. That way the maximum funds are raised for charities.

*Forever in Fiction is a registered trademark owned by Karen Kingsbury.

Forever in Fiction®

Ek wil spesiaal dankie sê aan die Northern Cross Foundation en die Spica-gesin wat Forever in Fiction by Grand Rapids se jaarlikse “Making it Home”-veiling gewen het. Die Spica-gesin het besluit om hulle vriend, die 58-jarige Dave Jacobs, te vereer deur hom te benoem vir Forever in Fiction. Dave is ’n steunpilaar in sy gemeenskap, ’n man met baie vriende en integriteit en geloof. Toe hy jonger was, het hy baie maatskaplike werk gedoen, maar toe betrokke geraak by Home Repair Services, ’n onderneming om die minderbevoorregtes in verskeie woonbuurte in Michigan te help.

Dave het verskeie toekennings ontvang vir sy filantropiese pogings, maar is steeds nederig en toegewy daaraan om die lewe beter te maak vir die mense om hom. Een van die grootste dinge wat hy al vermag het, sluit sy huwelik met sy vrou, Lois, en hulle vier kinders in. Hy is lief vir houtwerk en voëlkyk, en wanneer hy saam met sy gesin na die noordelike deel van die skiereiland van Michigan reis, probeer hy om albei hierdie stokperdjies te doen.

Dave se karakter in hierdie boek is dié van ’n vrygewige ontwikkelaar wie se Oak Canyon Estates bedreig word deur dreigemente van ’n radikale omgewingsgroep. Ek kon sien hoe Dave in daardie rol pas; iemand wat in beheer van ’n span konstruksiewerke is, maar wat steeds die nodige tyd afstaan om saam met familie en vriende te kuier, en ’n verskil te maak in sy gemeenskap.

Ek hoop dat die Spica-gesin hulle vriend Dave vereer deur hulle geskenk en sy plek in hierdie boek, en dat hulle altyd vir Dave sal onthou wanneer hulle sy naam in hierdie roman lees, terwyl hy altyd deel van fiksie sal bly.

Vir dié van julle wat nie weet van Forever in Fiction nie: Dit is my manier om julle, die lesers, by my stories te betrek én geld vir liefdadigheid in te samel. Tot dusver het Forever in Fiction meer as \$100 000 by liefdadigheidsveilinge ingesamel. Ek kan natuurlik net ’n beperkte hoeveelheid van hierdie geleenthede elke jaar aanbied. Ek het dus ’n redelik hoë minimumbod daarop gestel sodat die hoogste moontlike bedrag ingesamel kan word. Al die geld word dan aan liefdadigheid geskenk.

ONE

Smog hung over the San Fernando Valley like a collapsed Boy Scout tent, filling in the spaces between the high-rise office buildings and freeway overpasses. The Pacific Ocean hadn't produced a breeze in three weeks, and by two o'clock that August afternoon temperatures had long since shot past the century mark.

Alex Brady didn't care.

He picked up his pace, pounding his Nikes against the shimmering asphalt. Salty sweat dripped down his temples and into the corners of his mouth, but he kept running, filling his lungs with the sweltering, stifling air. Something about the sting in his chest made him feel good, stirred the intensity of his run. The intensity of his existence. If chasing bad guys on the streets of Los Angeles didn't kill him, he wasn't going to keel over on the Pierce College running track. Whatever the weather.

Five miles and ten hill sprints every off-day, that was his mandate. And he never made the trip without Bo.

They were alone on the track today, no one else crazy enough to push this hard in the suffocating heat. He glanced at the German shepherd keeping pace alongside him. His dog, his partner for every on-duty call. His best friend, his only friend. "Atta boy." The dog wasn't even breathing hard. Alex slowed long enough to pat Bo's deep brown coat. They both needed a drink. Alex's ribs heaved as he ran to the bleachers and slowed to a stop. He grabbed one of his water bottles from the lowest row and downed half of it. Bo found his bowl a few feet away and lapped like crazy. This was a two-bottle day if ever there was one.

Alex slammed the bottle back down on the bench and kicked his run into gear again. His dog was a few seconds behind him, but he caught up easily. "Alright, Bo ... let's get this." Alex could feel the workout now, feel his legs screaming for relief the way they always did when he had a mile left.

Bo's earnest eyes seemed to say he would stay by his master whatever the pace, whatever the distance. Alex wiped the back of his hand across his

forehead and squinted against the glare of the afternoon sun. Without question, Bo was the best police dog in the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department. Every bit as fit as Alex, and with a resumé of heroism unequalled among K9 units.

Another lap and Alex noticed something on the surface of the track. His running shoes were leaving an imprint. The asphalt was that hot. Good thing Bo was running on the grass. *Push through it*, he ordered himself. *Dad would've done this without breaking a sweat.*

And then, like it did at least once a day, a rush of memories came over him so hard and fast he could almost feel the wind from its wake. His dad, Captain Ben Brady, New York City firefighter. His hero, his best friend. Suddenly it was all real again. The sound of his voice, the feel of his hand ... firm against Alex's shoulder when he lost the big game his junior year ... running alongside Alex when he was six and learning to ride a bike ... or even before that, when he lifted Alex up into the fire truck that very first time.

Two more laps, Brady. You can do it. Alex clenched his teeth and pushed himself, but the memories stayed. There was his dad, hovering over his bed that September Tuesday morning, placing his hand against the side of Alex's face. "Buddy ... time to get up. You gotta ace that math test ... we'll talk about the other stuff when I get home."

The other stuff. Alex blinked and the hillside that surrounded half the track appeared again. The other stuff was Alex's determination to parlay his years as a fire cadet into an immediate position with the FDNY. As a teen, Alex could already see himself in the uniform, rushing into burning buildings, climbing atop blazing rooftops, rescuing families and putting out fires. His dad saw things differently. College would be better. His grades were good, his SAT scores in the top ten percent. Why battle fires in Manhattan when you could work in an office with a view of Central Park? Alex was sure that was the message his dad was going to deliver that night.

Only the message never came.

The terrorists ... the terrorists picked that day to —

Alex found a reserve of energy for the last lap. "Come on, Bo." He could feel the heat in his face and neck and arms, but he pushed ahead. Of course he hadn't gone to college, and he hadn't spent another day desiring a job with the FDNY. He'd done the only thing he could do. He moved as far away from New York City as he could and threw himself into earning a sheriff's badge. That way he could consume himself with the one job that mattered after September 11. Get the bad guys.

Didn't matter if they were drunk drivers or gang thugs, bank robbers or terrorists plotting the next big attack, Alex wanted them off the street. That desire was all that drove him, the only purpose he felt born to fulfill. Get rid of the evil. He and Bo. So that some other high school senior wouldn't have to sit in his Shakespearean English class and watch his dad murdered on live television.

He took the last ten yards at a sprint, his heart bursting from his chest, and then he dropped back to a walk. The smog didn't pass for oxygen, and he couldn't catch his breath. But he'd been here before. He knew how to work with the heat and dirty air. He pursed his lips and blew it all out, emptying his lungs, making space for his next breath. "Go on, Bo ...". He followed the dog to the water, and by the time he reached the bleachers he was breathing again. Ready for the hills.

He downed the rest of the first bottle and paced a few yards in either direction. Bo stayed by his water bowl, but his eyes moved from Alex to the hill at the other end of the stadium. "Give me a minute." He grabbed his towel from the bleachers and buried his face in it. The hills were the best part. For a few intense minutes, he could feel what his father had felt, the way he must've pushed himself up the stairs of the North Tower, looking for victims, seeking the wounded and trapped on one floor after another.

He tossed his towel on the bleachers and stretched hard to the right, lengthening his core muscles and bringing relief to his tired body. The left side was next, and when he finished he nodded to the dog. "Come on." He jogged to the base of the hill with the German shepherd on the grass at his side. Then, without waiting, he lowered his head and dug into the hillside. The ground was steep, all craggy dirt clods and forgotten weeds, but his footing stayed sure and steady.

Move it ... push harder, he ordered himself. Halfway up the hill the burning began and Alex welcomed it. Again his surroundings faded and Alex could see the stairwell, the way it must've looked as his father climbed higher and higher. People rushing down the stairs, firefighters rushing up. He would do this as often as he could, every day when he didn't don the uniform, and he would remember everything his father stood for. Everything that drove him and gave him purpose in life.

Bo made it to the top of the hill ahead of him, tongue hanging from his mouth halfway to the ground. But even then the dog was ready for the downhill, ready for the next nine trips back up. *Faster ... don't let up*. He wiped the back of his hand across his wet forehead and focused on the path back down. At the base of the hill he glanced at his watch. He needed to push through this thing. He still had to grab a shower and run a few errands before dinner at the

Michaels' house. And he wouldn't miss dinner.

The evenings with Sergeant Clay Michaels and his wife, Jamie, were the only social invites Alex received. Most times he didn't really want to go, didn't want someone worrying about him or probing around in his personal life. But he promised himself he'd show up every time Clay and Jamie asked. Otherwise, he'd become a machine, an unfeeling robot whose sole purpose in life was to round up crooks and lock them away. Alex squinted at the hill and attacked it a second time. Not that he minded being a machine. He sort of liked the idea. But if he lost touch completely with people, he might forget one very important aspect of his job —

The pain of it.

A driving force for Alex was the way people were hurt by bad guys, because there was way too much mind-boggling sorrow out there. Deep life-altering sadness like the kind that had ripped into him and his mom on September 11, 2001. If he lost track of the human suffering, he could just go ahead and hang up his gun, because the hurt was why he was here in the first place. So yeah, he would keep his dinner invitation tonight and anytime Clay and his wife made room for him at their table. Because being around them kept alive what was left of his heart. That and times like this, when his workout actually allowed him to think beyond the next few minutes.

The workout did something else, too — if only for a few hours.

It made him forget the girl he'd left back in New York City, and all the reasons he'd walked away from her. A girl whose indelible fingerprints stayed on his heart and whose contagious laughter and easy smile had a way of catching up to him, no matter how hard and fast he ran.

A girl named Holly Brooks.

Hoofstuk 1

Rookmis hang oor die San Fernando-vallei soos 'n tent wat inmekaargeval het, en vul die ruimtes tussen die hoë kantoorgeboue en oorpaaie. Die Stille Oseaan het in drie weke se tyd nog nie 'n windjie opgelewer nie, en teen twee-uur die middag is die temperatuur al baie hoog vir Augustus.

Maar Alex Brady gee nie om nie.

Hy hardloop vinniger en sy Nike-tekkies kap-kap op die glimmende teer. Souterige sweetdruppels hardloop langs sy slape af tot in sy mondhoeke, maar hy hou aan hardloop en sy longe word gevul met die snikhete, drukkende lug. Iets omtrent die pyn in sy bors laat hom goed voel, wakker die intensiteit aan terwyl hy draf. Die intensiteit van sy bestaan. Om agter kriminele in die strate

van Los Angeles aan te hardloop het hom nog nie doodgemaak nie; daarom gaan hy nie nou op Pierce College se atletiekbaan omslaan nie. Ongeag die weerstoestande.

Agt kilometer en tien keer op en af met die bultjie elke dag wat hy af is; dít is sy voorneme. En hy het dit nog nooit sonder Bo gedoen nie.

Hulle is vandag alleen op die baan. Niemand anders is gek genoeg om in die versengende hitte te oefen nie. Hy kyk na die Duitse Herdershond wat langs hom draf. Dit is sy hond; sy kollega wanneer hy op diens is en uitgeroep word. Sy beste vriend; sy enigste vriend. “Jou ou doring!” Die hond is nog nie eers uitasem nie. Alex draf ’n bietjie stadiger om Bo se donkerbruin pels te vryf. Hulle albei moet iets drink. Alex se ribbes beweeg op en af terwyl hy na die pawiljoen hardloop, stadiger draf en dan gaan staan. Hy gryp een van sy waterbottels op die onderste trappie en drink die helfte van die water. Bo loop na sy bak ’n entjie weg en begin die water gulsig oplek. Vandag is definitief ’n dag vir baie water drink.

Alex sit sy waterbottel op die trappie neer en begin weer hardloop. Sy hond is ’n paar sekondes agter hom, maar verskyn vinnig weer langs Alex. “Oukei, Bo. Kom ons kry dit agter die rug.” Alex kan nou voel hy het geoefen en sy bene smag na ’n bietjie verligting soos altyd wanneer daar net ’n kilometer oor is.

Dit is asof Bo se ernstige oë sê dat hy by sy baas sal bly, maak nie saak hoe vinnig of hoe ver hy hardloop nie. Alex vryf met sy hand oor sy voorkop en knyp sy oë toe teen die skerp middagson. Bo is sonder twyfel die beste polisie-hond in Los Angeles se Sheriff Departement. Hy is net so fiks soos Alex en sy hoeveelheid heldedade kan nie deur enige ander honde-eenheid oortref word nie.

Ná nog ’n rondte sien Alex iets op die oppervlak van die baan. Dit is so warm dat sy tekkies ’n afdruk op die baan laat. Ook maar goed Bo hardloop op die gras. *Hou aan, druk hy homself. Pa sou dit sonder ’n enkele sweetdruppel gedoen het.*

En dan, soos dit gewoonlik ten minste een keer per dag gebeur, spoel ’n stroom herinneringe so vinnig oor hom hy kan amper die krag daaragter voel. Sy pa, kaptein Ben Brady, ’n brandweerman in New York. Sy held, sy beste vriend. Skielik word alles weer ’n werklikheid. Sy stem, sy hand wat aan hom raak ... bemoedigend op Alex se skouer toe hy die belangrike wedstryd in sy graad 11-jaar verloor het ... hy wat langs Alex hardloop toe hy ses was en hom geleer het hoe om fiets te ry ... of selfs voor dit, toe hy daardie eerste keer vir Alex op die brandweerwa getel het.

Nog twee rondtes, Brady. Jy kan dit doen. Alex byt op sy tande en hou aan hardloop, maar die herinneringe bly by hom. Sy pa wat daardie Dinsdagoggend in September oor sy bed gebuig staan met sy hand langs Alex se gesig. “Kom seun ... jy moet opstaan. Jy moet daardie wiskundetoets gaan wys wie is baas. Ons sal oor die ander dinge praat wanneer ek by die huis kom.”

Die ander dinge. Alex knip sy oë en die bultjie wat halfpad om die atletiekbaan strek, verskyn weer. Die ander dinge was Alex se vasberadenheid om sy jare as brandweerkadet te omskep in 'n onmiddellike posisie by die brandweer in New York. As tiener kon Alex homself al in die uniform sien, hoe hy in brandende geboue inhardloop, bo-op brandende dakke klim, hoe hy gesinne red en vure blus. Sy pa het egter anders daaroor gedink. Om verder te gaan studeer sou beter wees. Hy het baie goeie punte gehad. Hoekom sal 'n mens vure in Manhattan wil bestry as jy in 'n kantoor kan werk wat oor Central Park uitkyk? Alex is seker dit is wat sy pa daardie aand vir hom wou sê.

Tog kon sy pa dit nooit doen nie.

Die terroriste ... die terroriste het daardie dag gekies om ...

Alex span sy laaste bietjie krag in om die laaste rondte te hardloop. “Kom, Bo!” Hy kan die hitte in sy gesig en nek en arms voel, maar hy beur steeds voort. Natuurlik het hy nie gaan studeer nie, en hy het nie een dag langer gewens om 'n brandweerman in New York te wees nie. Hy het die enigste ding gedoen wat hy kon doen: Hy het so ver moontlik weggetrek van New York en 'n polisieman geword. Op hierdie manier kon hy hom besig hou met die enigste werk wat ná 11 September saak gemaak het: om kriminele te vang. Dit maak nie saak of hulle dronkbestuur, aan 'n bende behoort, bankrowers of terroriste is wat die volgende groot aanval beplan nie. Alex wil hulle agter tralies hê. Dít is die begeerte wat hom dryf, die enigste doelwit wat hy nastreef. Hy en Bo moet ontslae raak van die bose, sodat die een of ander hoërskoolleerder nie in 'n Engels-klas hoef te sit en oor die televisie moet sien hoe sy pa vermoor word nie.

Hy hardloop baie vinnig die laaste tien meter. Dit voel of sy hart uit sy bors gaan skeur, en dan begin hy stap. Die rookmis verander nie in suurstof nie, en dit voel of hy nie sy asem kan terugkry nie. Maar hy was al voorheen hier. Hy weet hoe om die hitte en vuil lug te hanteer. Hy pers sy lippe op mekaar en blaas sy asem uit, forseer die lug uit sy longe om plek te maak om in te asem. “Hardloop, Bo ...” Hy volg die hond na die water, en teen die tyd dat hy by die pawiljoen kom, haal hy weer asem. Reg vir die bultjies.

Hy drink die res van die water uit die bottel en stap 'n paar treë heen en weer. Bo bly by sy waterbak, maar sy oë beweeg van Alex na die bultjie aan die ander kant van die stadion. “Gee my net 'n blaaskans.” Hy tel sy handdoek van die trappies af op en vee sy gesig af. Die bultjies is die beste deel. Vir 'n paar intense minute kan hy voel hoe sy pa gevoel het, hoe hy homself gedwing het om met die trap in die noordelike toring op te hardloop, op soek na slagoffers, na beseerdes en dié wat vasgevang was op elke vloer.

Hy gooi sy handdoek op die trappies neer en leun oor na sy regterkant, strek sy spiere om sy moë lyf te laat ontspan. Dan strek hy na sy linkerkant, en toe hy klaar is, knik hy vir die hond. “Komaan.” Hy draf na die voet van die bultjie met die Duitse Herdershond op die gras langs hom. Dan, sonder om te wag, laat sak hy sy kop en hardloop met die bult op. Die grond is steil,

klipperig en vol onkruid, maar sy voete trap stewig vas.

Roer jou ... hardloop vinniger, beveel hy homself. Halfpad teen die bult op begin die brandende pyn en Alex verwelkom dit. Weereens skuif Alex sy onmiddellike omgewing op die agtergrond en hy kan die trap sien, hoe dit moes gelyk het toe sy pa hoër en hoër geklim het. Mense wat met die trap afbeweeg, brandweermanne wat met die trap op storm. Hy sal dit doen so gereeld hy kan, elke dag as hy nie aan diens is nie, en hy sal alles onthou waarvoor sy pa geleef het. Alles wat hom dryfkrag en 'n doel in die lewe gegee het.

Bo is eerste bo met sy tong wat halfpad op die grond hang. Maar die hond is klaar gereed om af te hardloop, reg vir die volgende nege keer se op en af. *Vinniger ... moenie laat slap lê nie*. Hy vee met sy hand oor sy nat voorkop en fokus op die pad af met die bult. Aan die onderkant kyk hy na sy horlosie. Hy moet gou maak. Hy moet nog gaan stort en 'n paar goedjies afhandel voor vanaand se ete by die Michaelse se huis. En dit gaan hy vir seker nie mis nie.

Die aande saam met sersant Clay Michaels en sy vrou, Jamie, is die enigste sosiale geleentheid waarheen Alex genooi word. Die meeste van die tyd wil hy nie eintlik gaan nie, hy wil nie hê iemand moet hulle oor hom bekommer of in sy persoonlike lewe rondkrap nie. Maar hy het homself belowe hy sal elke keer gaan wanneer Clay en Jamie hom oornooi. Anders sal hy 'n masjien word, 'n emosielose robot met net een doel: om skelms te vang en agter tralies toe te sluit. Alex trek sy oë op skrefies, kyk na die bultjie voor hom, en val dit dan vir 'n tweede keer aan. Nie dat hy omgee om 'n masjien te wees nie. Hy hou eintlik van die idee. Maar as hy heeltemal kontak met mense verloor, gaan hy dalk 'n baie belangrike aspek van sy werk vergeet ...

Die pyn daarvan.

Die feit dat mense deur slegte mense seergemaak word, is vir Alex 'n dryfkrag, want daar is heeltemal te veel hartseer in die wêreld wat nie sin maak nie. Groot, lewensveranderende hartseer soos wat hom en sy ma uitmekaargeskeur het op 11 September 2001. As hy tred verloor met die mens se lyding, kan hy netsowel sy geweer weggooi, want dit is die seerkry wat hom aan die gang hou. Daarom sal hy vanaand sy ete-afspraak nakom asook al die ander kere wat Clay en sy vrou vir hom plek maak om hulle tafel. Om in hulle geselskap te wees, hou dit wat oor is van sy hart lewend. Dít en tye soos dié wanneer oefening hom toelaat om verder te dink as die volgende paar minute.

Die oefening doen ook iets anders, al is dit net vir 'n paar uur.

Dit laat hom vergeet van die meisie wat hy in New York agtergelaat het, en al die redes hoekom hy daar weg is. 'n Meisie wie se onuitwisbare vingerafdrukke op sy hart bly en wie se aansteeklike lag en glimlag hom inhaal, maak nie saak hoe vinnig hy hardloop nie.

'n Meisie met die naam Holly Brooks.

TWO

Clay Michaels reached into the pantry of his Calabasas, California, home, pulled out a plastic pitcher, and handed it to his wife, Jamie. “Everyone here?”

“Not yet.” She took the pitcher and filled it with three scoops of powdered lemonade. “We’re waiting on Alex. Everyone else is out back.” She leaned close and gave him a quick kiss. “Time for you to work your magic.”

He caught her by the waist and eased her close to him. “You mean ...” he kissed her again, long enough to take her breath away, “... like this?”

She took a step back, starry-eyed, and inhaled sharply. “Later.” She glanced over her shoulder at the window that separated the kitchen from the backyard. “They’re hungry.” She straightened her shirt, spun around to the fridge, and pulled out a tray of raw burgers. “This magic.”

Clay took the tray and grinned at her. “Where’s Sierra?”

“In the garage with Wrinkles,” she frowned. “That cat’s been sleeping all day.”

“Yeah, well,” Clay made a silly face and balanced the tray of burgers on the palm of one hand. “With a three-year-old running around, sometimes I think we could all use a nap in the garage.”

Clay’s brother Eric opened the slider door and stayed beside him while the burgers cooked. Not far away on the patio, Jamie sat with Eric’s wife, Laura, across from Joe and Wanda Reynolds. The six of them did this regularly, getting together at one of their homes for a weekend barbecue.

Eric was talking about a deal at work, an acquisition of some kind, but Clay was catching only every other word, distracted by Michael Bubl  playing in the background and the happy voices of the kids on the swing set across the yard. Three-year-old CJ was running his Hot Wheels car on the slide with Joe and Wanda’s little boy, Will. The two looked like miniature versions of their fathers — one blond and blue-eyed, one black with sparkling brown eyes, the best of buddies. On the nearest swing, Eric and Laura’s little red-headed girl,

Lacey, was giggling at them.

Clay turned his attention to the burgers. “Looks like they’re just about ready.”

Eric peered inside the grill. “I’ll get the buns.”

“They’re inside on the counter.” Clay surveyed the scene again. The thick smell of burgers mixed with the warm summer sweetness from the gardenias, the ones Jamie planted along the back of the property the week they moved in. Clay breathed in deeply. He wanted to freeze the moment, wrap his arms around it, and never let it go.

Times like this, he could almost forget the pressure of his job, the responsibility he wore like a heavy yoke when he headed off to the LA sheriff’s Monterey Park headquarters. Tonight he wasn’t a sergeant with the Special Enforcement Bureau or one of the most respected men in the department. He wasn’t training the next group of SWAT guys or worrying about threats from local environmental terrorist groups a few weeks shy of what could be the area’s worst fire season ever.

No, tonight he was a married man, longing to stretch out the weekend hours. He was a daddy who didn’t mind wearing a jester hat when the kids played dress-up and a friend who had stayed faithful through too many highs and lows to remember. He was a brother and an uncle, a God-fearing family man who prayed daily for the people in his life. Most of all — no matter what work threw at him — he was a believer.

All the things he feared Deputy Alex Brady might never be.

He was sliding burgers off the grill and onto the open buns on the tray in Eric’s hands when he heard someone at the patio door. He turned in time to see Alex walk through the door, his expression marked by an unspoken apology. “Traffic on the 101,” he shrugged as he set his keys on a table just outside the patio door. He wore a white T-shirt and jeans, his short dark hair streaked with a few blond highlights and styled more like a contemporary pop star than a sheriff’s deputy. Alex gave Clay a half-grin. “Your famous burgers again, huh, Sarge?”

“That’s why they call me ‘Magic’.” He kept his tone light. Alex came for dinner once a month or so, and usually they never got past shoptalk. But Clay had a feeling about tonight, that maybe they could find their way to something deeper, like why it was Alex had trouble connecting with any other human being. “Did you bring Bo?”

“He’s out front. Tied him up on the porch.”

“We’ll save him a burger.”

The men headed to the table and Clay called the kids. Eric and Laura's son Josh came in through the side gate, a basketball tucked beneath his arm, his face damp with sweat. He was fifteen now and almost as tall as Eric. Behind him were Joe and Wanda's older two — both in middle school and fascinated with basketball.

"They're good." Josh waved his thumb at the Reynolds kids. "I barely beat 'em."

"Yeah right." The oldest of the Reynolds kids rolled his eyes. He used his tank top to wipe his forehead. "He schooled us again." The three older kids took their plates and headed out front once more.

As the younger kids finished eating, they ran to the swings, leaving the seven adults sitting around Clay and Jamie's patio table. Joe took a long drink of his lemonade and sat back in his chair. He shaded his eyes and watched CJ, Will, and Lacey. "The miracle babies are growing up."

Clay smiled at the term. *Miracle babies*. That's what the couples had called their youngest children ever since the three of them arrived — all within a year of each other. Lacey was the baby Eric and Laura never would've had if not for a fateful business trip on September 11, 2001. If Eric hadn't spent three months in New York City recovering from his injuries and learning how to be the father and family man he had never been, their marriage wouldn't have survived.

Joe and Wanda's marriage had been over as well, their love for each other lost in the aftermath of heartache when their firstborn son was hit and killed by a car. Years passed with the two of them living separate lives on opposite coasts, but then Joe dragged Clay to New York City for police training and something more — a chance to reunite with Wanda.

Joe was laughing now, telling a story about little Will. Clay studied his friend. There were no signs of the near-fatal gunshot wound he'd gotten while on that New York trip. All that mattered was he'd come back with Wanda ready to start over again. Their son Will was proof that God could bless even the most broken people with a second chance.

And, of course, his and Jamie's own little CJ. It was still hard to believe that on that same New York trip, Clay had connected with Jamie — Jamie Bryan, the very woman who had nursed Clay's brother, Eric, back to health in the months after 9/11. Love for them had been sure and fast — beauty borne of ashes. By then Clay had all but given up on marrying and having a family, and Jamie never for a moment thought that someday her daughter, Sierra, would have a sibling.

But here they were, all of them — embracing life and raising their miracle babies.

Joe nodded toward the kids. “Lacey’s definitely in charge.” He was holding Wanda’s hand, the two of them relaxed and happy together. Little Will had his mother’s milk chocolate skin, and his father’s sense of humor. The boy loved nothing more than to tease the lone girl who rounded out their trio.

“I’ll tell you what,” Wanda made a jaunty snap of her fingers, her eyes still on Lacey, “that little girl’s going to run a corporation someday.”

Eric and Laura both laughed, and Eric anchored his elbows on the table. “She’d probably be good at it.”

“You ever think about it?” Laura wore sunglasses, but now she took them off, her eyes thoughtful. She looked at the others around the table. “None of them would be here if it weren’t for 9/11.”

“We wouldn’t be here, either. Not together.” Joe brought Wanda’s hand to his lips and kissed it. He held her gaze for a long moment, then looked back at Laura. “Yeah, we think about it. Every now and then, anyway.”

At the mention of the terrorist attacks, Clay shot a quick glance at Alex. He’d been quiet until now, mostly eating his way through three burgers and listening to the conversation about the children. But with the talk of September 11, a shadow fell across his expression, and his eyes grew dark. He wiped his mouth with a napkin, pushed back from the table, and turned to Clay. “Thanks for dinner.” He smiled, but it didn’t move past his lips. “Great as always.”

“Wait a minute, young man.” Wanda was on her feet, her hands on her hips, laughter in her voice. “You see those apple pies in there? I worked my tail off making those, and far as I can tell your skinny backside could use one all for yourself ... so sit back down.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Alex chuckled, but his body language was stiff. “Gotta check on Bo. He’s tied up out front.”

“Okay, then.” Wanda waggled her finger at him. “You come right back, and bring that appetite of yours.”

Clay waited until Alex had walked back into the house and shut the patio door behind him. Then he crossed his arms and caught Joe’s eyes. “I’m worried about him,” he told his friend.

A heaviness settled over the table, and Joe released a weighty sigh. “Anytime 9/11 comes up, it’s the same way.” He squinted in the direction where Alex

had gone back into the house. “Kid’s eighteen again, hearing the news for the first time.”

Laura’s shoulders sank forward and she looked at Eric, and then the others. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said anything. I forget he’s still struggling.”

“The man’s not *struggling*. He’s consumed.” Joe shook his head. “Completely consumed.”

“He doesn’t have family in the area, does he?” Eric looped his arm around Laura’s shoulders. “No girlfriend?”

“No family. And he hasn’t talked about a girl.” Clay uncrossed his arms and reached for Jamie’s hand. She gave his fingers a gentle squeeze. “He lost his dad when the towers came down. Finished high school, took off for the West Coast and left his mom back in New York City. She remarried some time later. Alex rarely talks to her, from what little I’ve gathered.” He looked back at the patio door. He didn’t want Alex to find them talking about him. “There might’ve been a girl back then. Don’t know where she is now or what happened to her, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone now.”

“That’s why we include him in our barbecues.” Jamie’s eyes held a knowing look, an understanding that came from having walked the same path Alex was still walking. “Otherwise he’s alone.”

“If anyone can feel for the guy, it’s us.” The teasing was gone from Wanda’s voice. A decade ago, after she and Joe divorced, Wanda moved to Queens and married a firefighter. He was killed in the Twin Towers, same as Jamie’s first husband, Jake, and Alex’s father, Ben. Yes, this was a group Alex could relate to, but there was one big difference between Alex and these couples.

Alex hadn’t moved on, not by a long shot. Because of that, the people around the patio table had never shared with Alex their personal connections to 9/11. It was enough that their common ground instilled a deep compassion from the group, without getting into the details of the past. Someday, Clay hoped to dig a little deeper with the young deputy, but based on Alex’s quick exit to check on his dog, that conversation probably wouldn’t happen tonight.

They heard the slider again, and Alex walked out carrying a pie in each hand. He slid the door shut with the toe of his work boot and brought the pies to the table. “Alright, Wanda,” the shadows were gone, but the walls around his heart remained. The flatness in his eyes was proof. “Let’s check out these pies of yours.”

She waved her hands at him and flopped back in her seat. “You do the honors, and make mine the smallest. Last thing I need’s a big ol’ slice of pie after that

dinner!”

The children scrambled to the table for a taste of the dessert, and after a little while the older kids stopped their game long enough to finish off what was left. Jamie made coffee, and the women went inside to check out some vacation spot Laura wanted to show them online. Only the men remained around the table, drinking their coffee and watching the little ones.

“Congratulations on that award you got.” Joe raised his brow at Alex. “You earned it.”

“Thanks.” Alex shifted in his seat. “Anyone could’ve won it.”

Clay knew that wasn’t true. The award went to the K9 team with the most arrests, and the fact was, no other team was close. “Your humility is admirable, Brady, but it’s a fact. You and Bo are the best,” Clay gave a firm nod. “The department’s lucky to have you.”

“Yeah, well ...” Alex gripped the arms of his chair and turned to Clay. He seemed anxious to change the subject. “So ... what do you hear about the REA?”

Clay exchanged a quick look with Joe. The SWAT division was hearing a lot about the group and the threat they posed to Los Angeles this year. Radical Environmental Activists, they called themselves. REA. Clay was newly in charge of the department’s monitoring of the group, and Alex and Bo were one of the K9 teams specially trained to deal with the group’s activity. Even so, Clay was careful how much he said. “We’re watching them.”

“They’re trouble.” Alex’s answer was sharp. “We need to be proactive next time.”

“There never shoulda’ been a first time.” Joe leaned on one forearm. “We had ‘em on our radar back when they were just thinking up bad stuff.” He flexed the muscles in his jaw. “I’m with you, man. We need to take ‘em out.”

“They’re smart.” Clay, too, wanted to round up the members and throw them in prison, but that wasn’t possible. Not yet. “They’re elusive and cunning. New members come alongside them all the time — like the REA is more of a mind-set than an actual group.”

“Oh, they’re an actual group.” Alex’s eyes hardened. “Eight of them, at least.” He hesitated. “I found out where they meet.”

Clay stared at the young deputy across from him. This was why he didn’t want to say too much. Alex was driven to get the REA more than any other criminal group on the streets. He was a good deputy, worthy of the honors

he'd received. But if he became obsessed, Clay would have no choice but to recommend Alex be taken off the case. He raised an eyebrow at the young deputy. "We've talked about this."

"I'm doing it by the book, Sarge." He didn't blink. "I'm just saying I have the information. When SWAT's ready, let's take this thing. The evidence is there." He took a swig of his coffee. "I've heard it from a lot of places."

They needed more than conversational evidence, and Alex knew it. Clay gritted his teeth and resisted the urge to continue with the topic. Of course the Special Enforcement Bureau knew about the REA — their headquarters and the scope of what they planned to do. But they didn't have a thread of physical evidence linking the group to previous acts of ecoterrorism. K9 deputies weren't intended to be part of the investigation — not until the time came for a search and arrest. Whether he was on the case or not, Alex had to be careful about spending his free time conducting quasi-investigations. He allowed the intensity to ease from his voice. "We're on it, Brady. We're watching."

Alex was quiet, his eyes locked on Clay's. "They're gonna hit Pasadena, the hills overlooking the city, right? That's the talk?"

Clay's heart skipped a beat, but he worked hard to keep his expression from giving anything away. Alex Brady was good. He might not have been in on every meeting, but he knew the department's deepest concerns. Almost as if he was getting information from the inside. Clay finished his coffee, relishing the few grounds at the bottom of the cup. "With the publicity they got last fire season, it's a sure bet there will be fires this year. The REA has fans even they don't know about."

"I think SWAT's wrong. I don't think it'll be Pasadena, Sarge." He lowered his voice and shifted his look to Joe. "They've got their eyes on Malibu, on that new development off Las Virgenes and Lost Hills ... Oak Canyon Estates. The gated custom homes up there."

Even with temperatures in the nineties, a chill worked its way down Clay's spine. In meetings, the entire SWAT division had considered just about every possibility for the sites where fires might be set by the radical members of REA. The Oak Canyon Estates were certainly mentioned, but no one took the idea seriously. The gates would keep out arsonists after hours, and even a group as crazy as the REA wouldn't set fire to custom homes while people were around.

"Not possible." Clay heard his work tone kick in, the voice he used when he was training SWAT guys. "Wherever you're getting your information, forget about it, Brady. Let us follow the leads. When it's time to make arrests, you'll

be there.” Clay reached over and gave Alex a hearty pat on his shoulder. “This is your day off, man. Relax.”

Alex nodded, slowly, thoughtfully. “Okay.” He stood and looked first at Joe, then at Clay. “I need to go. Got to get Bo home.” He mustered a stale smile as he turned and headed for the door. “Thanks for tonight.”

Frustration poked at Clay. This was hardly the breakthrough he’d asked God for. “Be right back,” he muttered to Joe. Then he stood and followed Alex to the patio door. “Wait.”

Alex turned around, his smile gone. “Who am I supposed to tell, huh?” His voice was intense, but he kept it low so the conversation stayed between them alone. “I’m sure about this, Clay. Dead sure.”

“There’s an order to things in the department, Brady.” Clay was more sorry than angry. “Let us take the lead. We’re on it; I promise you.”

Alex studied him a moment longer. “What if you’re too late? Have you thought about that?” He gestured toward the hills. “Every bit of that canyon is filled with homes. People could die this time. A lot of people.”

Again Clay didn’t want to say too much. He could hardly tell the young deputy that the scenario he’d just hit on was the exact one the department brass were concerned about. Instead, he took hold of Alex’s upper arm and held it, the way a father might hold onto his son. “We know that. Trust us on this.”

Alex didn’t try to pull away. He must’ve heard in Clay’s voice that the conversation was over, and he looked down at a spot on the grass.

“Listen, Alex, what’s eating you? The anniversary? Is that it?”

“No.” Alex lifted his eyes, and they flashed with a sudden intensity. “September 11 is just another day. It’s the next anniversary, man.” He jabbed himself a few times in the chest. “That’s what’s eating me.”

“Okay.” Clay released his hold on the deputy. “I’m here, Brady. If you need to talk, I’m here.”

Alex took a few seconds for his anger to dissipate, and then he managed the briefest smile, just enough to convey that his determination wasn’t directed at Clay, but at the bad guys. He left and Clay watched him head through the house, stopping just long enough to thank Jamie and tell the other women good-bye. A few minutes later he heard Alex’s truck start up out front, and the slight squeal of tires as Alex pulled away.

By then Joe had joined him beneath the covered patio. The two faced the children, who were chasing each other through the grass in small circles, giggling and falling down every few steps. “You know what it is, don’t you?”

“Sure.” Clay felt the full weight of his defeat that night. He’d hoped to invite Alex to church, talk to him about getting involved in the singles ministry. But the guy was a world away from that sort of invitation. “Kid’s full of pain.”

“That’s only part of it.” Joe crossed his arms tightly in front of him. “For Alex Brady, it’s still September 11.” He gave a strong shake of his head. “He’s still stuck on that dreaded Tuesday morning.”

Long after they’d moved the children into the house and slipped in a Jana Alayra music video, and even after the couples gathered around the nearby card table for a game of Apples to Apples, Clay couldn’t shake what Joe had said, how perfectly he’d nailed the trouble with Alex Brady. The deputy had never moved on, never found his way to a life without his father. Sure, he was three thousand miles away from New York City, but not in his heart. And Clay had the feeling that on every call the kid felt the impact again, the Twin Towers crashing down, the bad guys winning bigger than ever before.

As the night wore on, for the first time Clay began to understand Alex’s near obsession with the REA. In some ways the group wasn’t that different from the people who had killed Alex’s father. It was a sobering thought, because the REA was really nothing more than a group of terrorists whose weapon was fire. The same weapon used by al Qaeda. A weapon that could create utter chaos and destroy massive structures in a matter of minutes, one that actually could do the one thing Alex feared might happen:

Take innocent lives in the process.

Hoofstuk 2

Clay Michaels kry die plastiekbeker uit die spens van sy huis in Calabasas, Kalifornië en gee dit vir sy vrou, Jamie. “Is almal hier?”

“Nog nie.” Sy vat die beker en maak dit vol koeldrank. “Ons wag nog vir Alex. Die res is almal buite.” Sy leun nader en gee hom ’n piksoentjie. “Dit is tyd vir jou om jou towerkrag te gebruik.”

Hy gryp haar om haar middel en trek haar nader. “Jy bedoel ... soos dit?” Hy soen haar weer, lank genoeg dat sy na haar asem snak.

In vervoering tree sy terug en haal diep asem. “Later.” Sy loer oor haar skouer na die kombuisvenster wat op die agterplaas uitkyk. “Hulle is honger.” Sy trek haar bloes reg, draai na die yskas en haal ’n skinkbord met vleis uit vir hamburgers. “Hierdie towerkrag.”

Clay vat die skinkbord by haar en glimlag. “Waar is Sierra?”

“In die motorhuis saam met Wrinkles,” frons sy. “Daardie kat slaap al die hele dag.”

“Ja, wel,” Clay trek sy gesig snaaks en balanseer die skinkbord op die palm van sy een hand. “Met ’n driejarige wat rondhardloop, dink ek ons almal wil soms ’n uiltjie knip in die motorhuis.”

Clay se broer Eric maak die skuifdeur oop en help hom om die vleis te braai. Nie ver weg op die stoep nie sit Jamie by Eric se vrou, Laura, oorkant Joe en Wanda Reynolds. Die ses van hulle doen dit gereeld; om oor naweke by een van hulle se huise te braai.

Eric praat oor die een of ander aanbieding by die werk, maar Clay hoor net elke tweede woord. Sy aandag word afgetrek deur die musiek van Michael Bublé in die agtergrond en die gelukkige stemmetjies van kinders wat besig is om op die klimraam te speel. Die driejarige CJ laat sy karretjie teen die glyplank af ry en speel saam met Joe en Wanda se seuntjie, Will. Die twee lyk op ’n haar na hulle pa’s – die een blond met blou oë, die ander een met swart hare en bruin oë, beste maatjies. Op die swaai die naaste aan Eric sit sy en Laura se klein rooikopdogtertjie, Lacey. Sy giggel terwyl sy vir die seuntjies kyk.

Clay se aandag verskuif na die vleis. “Lyk of dit gaar is.”

Eric loer daarna. “Ek sal gou die broodjies kry.”

“Dit is hier binne op die kombuis.” Clay kyk weer na die toneel. Die reuk van hamburgers meng met die warm soet geur van die katjeeperings wat Jamie al langs die agterste muur geplant het net toe hulle ingetrek het. Clay asem diep in. Hy wil die oomblik vir altyd vasvang, sy arms om dit vou en nooit laat gaan nie.

Dit is tye soos dié dat hy amper van die druk by die werk kan vergeet, die verantwoordelikheid wat hy soos ’n swaar juk dra wanneer hy na die Los Angeles Polisie se hoofkantoor in Monterey Park gaan. Vanaand is hy nie ’n sersant in die polisie of een van die mees gerespekteerde mans in die eenheid nie. Hy lei nie die volgende groep SWAT-lede op of bekommer hom oor dreigemente van plaaslike omgewingsterroriste net ’n paar weke voor een van die gebied se ergste seisoene vir die uitbreek van veldbrande nie.

Nee, vanaand is hy ’n getroude man wat wens die naweek kan langer aanhou. Hy is ’n pa wat nie omgee om ’n narhoed te dra wanneer die kinders speel nie en ’n vriend wat getrou bly deur goeie en slegte tye. Hy is ’n broer en ’n oom, ’n Godvresende gesinsman wat daaglik vir die mense in sy lewe bid. En maak nie saak wat sy werk inhou nie, hy bly ’n gelowige.

Al die dinge wat hy vrees die polisieman Alex Brady nooit sal wees nie.

Hy is besig om die vleis van die vuur af te haal en op die oop broodjies op die skinkbord in Eric se hande te sit, toe hy iemand by die stoepdeur hoor. Hy draai om en sien vir Alex wat uit die huis kom, sy gesigsuitdrukking sê hy is jammer dat hy laat is. “Die verkeer is ’n malhuis,” hy haal sy skouers op terwyl hy sy sleutels op die stoep tafel neersit. Hy het ’n wit T-hemp en ’n denimbreek aan, en sy kort, donker hare met die paar ligstrepe in laat hom

meer soos 'n hedendaagse popster as 'n polisieman lyk. Alex gee vir Clay 'n skewe glimlag. “Eet ons al weer jou beroemde hamburgers, Sersant?”

“Hulle sê nie verniet ek beskik oor towerkrag nie,” sê hy spottenderwys. Alex kom so een maal per maand oor vir aandete en gewoonlik praat hulle net oor werk. Maar Clay het 'n gevoel dat hulle vanaand miskien oor iets dieper gaan praat, soos hoekom Alex dit moeilik vind om aanklank te vind by ander mense. “Het jy vir Bo saamgebring?”

“Hy is voor. Ek het hom voor by die stoep vasgemaak.”

“Ons sal vir hom 'n hamburger los.”

Die mans gaan sit aan en Clay roep die kinders. Eric en Laura se seun Josh kom by die hekkie aan die kant van die huis in met 'n basketbalbal onder sy arm, sy gesig nat van die sweet. Hy is nou vyftien jaar oud en amper net so lank soos Eric. Agter hom loop Joe en Wanda se oudste twee – al twee amper klaar met laerskool en gefassineer deur basketbal.

“Hulle is goed.” Josh wys na die Reynolds-kindere. “Ek wen hulle net-net.”

“Ja, reg.” Die oudste een rol sy oë. Hy vat sy T-hemp en vee oor sy voorkop.

“Hy het ons weer 'n ding of twee geleer.” Die drie ouer kinders vat hulle borde en gaan weer na die voorkant van die huis.

Toe die jonger kinders klaar geëet het, hardloop hulle na die swaai, en los die sewe volwassenes waar hulle om Clay en Jamie se stoepafel sit. Joe vat 'n groot sluk koeldrank en sit terug in sy stoel. Hy hou sy hand voor sy oë om die son te keer en kyk na CJ, Will en Lacey. “Die wonderbabas word groot.”

Clay glimlag vir die term *wonderbabas*. Dit is wat die paartjies hulle jongste kinders noem sedert die drie van hulle in die lewe gebring is – almal 'n jaar uit mekaar. Lacey is die baba wat Eric en Laura nooit sou gehad het as dit nie vir 'n noodlottige sakereis op 11 September 2001 was nie. As Eric nie drie maande in New York deurgebring het om te herstel nadat hy seergekry het en nie geleer het hoe om die pa en gesinsman te wees wat hy nooit was nie, sou hulle huwelik iets van die verlede gewees het.

Joe en Wanda se huwelik was ook op die rotse toe hulle liefde vir mekaar verlore gegaan het as gevolg van die hartseer toe hulle eersgebore seun deur 'n motor doodgery is. Vir jare daarna het hulle twee hul eie lewe weg van mekaar geleef, maar Joe het vir Clay New York toe gevat vir polisie-opleiding en iets meer – die kans om weer met Wanda te verenig.

Joe lag terwyl hy 'n storie oor klein Will vertel. Clay hou sy vriend dop. Daar is geen tekens van die amper fatale skietwond wat hy tydens daardie reis na New York opgedoen het nie. Al wat saak maak is dat hy saam met Wanda teruggekom het, gereed om weer oor te begin. Hulle seun Will is 'n bewys dat God selfs die stukkendste mense met 'n tweede kans kan seën.

En natuurlik is sy en Jamie se eie seuntjie, CJ, ook 'n bewys daarvan. Dit is steeds moeilik om te glo dat tydens daardie selfde reis na New York, daar iets tussen Clay en Jamie ontwikkel het – Jamie Bryan, die vrou wat Clay se broer, Eric, in die maande ná 11 September versorg het. Die liefde tussen hulle was vas en seker, skoonheid wat uit die as verrys het. Teen daardie tyd

het Clay nooit gedink hy sou trou en 'n gesin hê nie, en Jamie het nie vir 'n oomblik gedink dat haar dogter, Sierra, 'n boetie sou hê nie.

Maar hier is hulle nou, almal van hulle, besig om die lewe te geniet en hulle wonderbabas groot te maak.

Joe knik in die rigting van die kinders. "Lacey is definitief in beheer." Hy hou Wanda se hand vas en hulle twee lyk ontspanne en gelukkig saam. Klein Will het sy ma se ligte vel en sy pa se sin vir humor. Die seuntjie is op sy gelukkigste wanneer hy die enigste dogtertjie in hulle driemanskap kan terg.

"Ek sê julle wat," Wanda klap haar vingers plesierig, haar oë steeds op Lacey, "daardie dogtertjie gaan eendag 'n besigheid bestuur."

Eric en Laura lag albei en Eric leun vooroor met sy elmboë op die tafel. "Sy sal dit heel waarskynlik baie goed kan doen."

"Het julle al ooit daaraan gedink?" Laura haal haar sonbril af en sy lyk in gedagte. Sy kyk na die ander om die tafel. "Nie een van hulle sou hier gewees het as dit nie vir 11 September was nie."

"Ons sou ook nie hier gewees het nie. Altans, nie saam nie." Joe tel Wanda se hand op en soen dit. Hy kyk diep in haar oë, en kyk dan weer na Laura. "Ja, ons dink soms daaraan. So nou en dan."

Clay kyk vinnig na Alex toe daar oor die terroriste-aanvalle gepraat word. Hy was tot nou toe stil, besig om drie hamburgers te eet en te luister na hulle gesprek oor die kinders. Maar toe hulle oor 11 September begin praat, raak sy gesigsuitdrukking somber en sy oë donker. Hy vee sy mond met 'n servet af, skuif sy stoel terug en draai na Clay. "Dankie vir die kos." Hy glimlag halfhartig. "Heerlik soos altyd."

"Wag, meneertjie." Wanda spring op met haar hande op haar heupe en 'n speelsheid in haar stem. "Sien jy daardie appelterte daarbinne? Ek het my oor 'n mik gewerk om dit te bak en sover ek kan sien, kan jou maer agterstewe doen met een ... so sit maar weer."

"Ja, Mevrouw!" Alex onderdruk sy lag, maar sy liggaamstaal is stram. "Ek moet net gou na Bo gaan kyk. Hy is daar voor vasgemaak."

"Goed dan." Wanda swaai haar vinger voor sy gesig. "Maar jy kom dadelik terug en bring jou soettand saam."

Clay wag totdat Alex in die huis is en die skuifdeur agter hom toe is. Dan vou hy sy arms oor sy bors en kyk na Joe. "Ek is bekommerd oor hom," sê hy vir sy vriend.

'n Swaarmoedigheid sak oor die tafel neer en Joe sug diep. "Elke keer wanneer daar oor 11 September gepraat word, tree hy dieselfde op." Hy trek sy oë op skrefies en kyk in die rigting van die deur waar Alex in die huis in gegaan het. "Dit is asof hy weer agtien is en die nuus vir die eerste keer hoor." Laura se skouers sak moedeloos en sy kyk na Eric, dan na die ander. "Ek is jammer. Ek moes nie iets gesê het nie. Ek vergeet dit is steeds moeilik vir hom."

"Dit is nie net vir hom *moeilik* nie. Dit beïnvloed sy hele lewe." Joe skud sy kop. "Sy hele lewe ly daaronder."

“Hy het nie familie hier naby nie, het hy?” Eric vou sy arm om Laura se skouers. “Nie ’n meisie nie?”

“Geen familie nie. En hy het nog nie van ’n meisie gepraat nie.” Clay se hand reik uit na Jamie s’n. Sy druk sy vingers liggies. “Hy het sy pa verloor toe die torings inmeaargestort het. Hy het klaar gemaak met hoërskool, na die weskus getrek en sy ma in New York agtergelaat. Sy is later weer getroud. Soos ek dit verstaan, praat Alex byna nooit met haar nie.” Hy kyk weer na die skuifdeur. Hy wil nie hê Alex moet hoor hulle praat oor hom nie. “Daar was dalk jare gelede ’n meisie. Ek weet nie waar sy nou is of wat van haar geword het nie, maar dit lyk nie of daar nou enigiemand is nie.”

“Dit is hoekom ons hom oornooi.” Daar is iets in Jamie se oë wat wys sy verstaan, aangesien sy dieselfde paadjie geloop het wat Alex steeds loop. “Anders is hy eensaam.”

“As daar enigiemand is wat simpatie het met die man, is dit ons.” Wanda klink nou ernstig. Tien jaar gelede, nadat sy en Joe geskei is, het Wanda na Queens getrek en is sy met ’n brandweerman getroud. Hy is dood in die Twin Towers, net soos Jamie se eerste man, Jake, en Alex se pa, Ben. Dit is inderdaad ’n groep mense by wie Alex tuis behoort te voel, maar daar is een groot verskil tussen Alex en hierdie paartjies.

Alex het hoegenaamd nog nie aanbeweeg nie. En daarom het die mense om die tafel nog nooit hulle persoonlike ervarings tydens 11 September met Alex gedeel nie. Dit is genoeg dat hulle as groep medelye met mekaar het, sonder om te veel aandag te skenk aan die besonderhede van die verlede. Clay hoop om eendag iets meer met die jong polisieman te deel, maar as hy so na Alex se vinnige reaksie kyk om te gaan kyk hoe dit met sy hond gaan, sal daardie gesprek nie vanaand plaasvind nie.

Hulle hoor weer die skuifdeur en Alex kom uitgeloop met twee terte. Hy skuif die deur met sy voet toe en bring dit na die tafel. “Goed, Wanda,” sy oë is nie meer so donker nie, maar die mure om sy hart is steeds daar. Die emosielose uitdrukking in sy oë is ’n bewys daarvan. “Kom ons probeer hierdie terte van jou.”

Sy waai met haar hande na hom en val terug in haar stoel. “Wees jy nou maar die gasheer en skep vir my die kleinste stukkie in. Die laaste ding wat ek na hierdie ete nodig het, is ’n groot stuk appeltert!”

Die kinders hardloop almal na die tafel toe vir ’n stukkie nagereg en ná ’n rukkie hou die ouer kinders ook gou op met speel om die laaste stuk op te eet. Jamie maak koffie en die vroue gaan binnetoe om na ’n vakansiebestemming te kyk wat Laura vir hulle op die internet wil wys. Die mans bly alleen om die tafel sit en koffie drink, en kyk na die kindertjies wat speel.

“Baie geluk met daardie toekenning wat jy ontvang het.” Joe lig sy wenkbrou in Alex se rigting. “Jy verdien dit.”

“Dankie.” Alex skuif in sy stoel. “Enigiemand kon dit gewen het.”

Clay weet dit is nie waar nie. Die toekenning word gegee aan die span in die honde-eenheid wat die meeste skurke in hegtenis neem, en die feit is dat nie

een ander span naby hulle was nie. “Jou nederigheid is benydenswaardig, Brady, maar dit is ’n feit. Jy en Bo is die beste,” Clay knik, seker van sy saak. “Die polisie is gelukkig om julle te hê.”

“Ja, wel ... ” Alex vat die stoel se armleunings vas en draai na Clay. Hy lyk gretig om die onderwerp te verander. “So, wat hoor jy van die ROA?”

Clay kyk vinnig na Joe. Die SWAT-afdeling weet baie van die groep af en die bedreiging wat hulle hierdie jaar vir Los Angeles inhou. Hulle noem hulleself die Radikale Omgewingsaktiviste. ROA. Clay is in beheer van die polisie-span wat die groep moet monitor, en Alex en Bo is een van die honde-eenheidspanne wat spesiaal opgelei is om die groep se aktiwiteite te hanteer. Selfs al is dit die geval, is Clay versigtig om te veel te sê. “Ons hou hulle dop.”

“Hulle is moeilikheid.” Alex antwoord skerp. “Ons moet volgende keer proaktief optree.”

“Daar moes in die eerste plek nooit ’n eerste keer gewees het nie.” Joe leun met sy kop op sy arm. “Ons het hulle al in ons radar gehad toe hulle nog net aan die slegte goed gedink het.” Die spier in sy wang trek styf. “Ek stem saam met jou. Ons moet ontslae raak van hulle.”

“Hulle is baie slim.” Clay wil ook die lede vang en in die tronk gooi, maar dit is nie moontlik nie. Nog nie. “Hulle ontduik ons en is uitgeslape. Nuwe lede sluit die hele tyd by hulle aan – asof die ROA meer ’n ingesteldheid as ’n ware groep is.”

“O, hulle is definitief ’n groep.” Alex se oë is weer emosieloos. “Hulle is ten minste agt.” Hy aarsel. “Ek het uitgevind waar hulle ontmoet.”

Clay staar na die jong polisieman oorkant hom. Dit is hoekom hy nie te veel wil sê nie. Alex is meer vasberade om die ROA agter tralies te kry as enige ander kriminele groep. Hy is ’n goeie polisieman en verdien die eer wat hy ontvang. Maar as hy obsessief gaan raak, gaan Clay nie anders kan as om aan te beveel dat Alex van die saak afgehaal word nie. Hy lig sy wenkbrou vir die jong polisieman. “Ons het al hieroor gepraat.”

“Ek volg die reëls, Sersant.” Hy knip nie sy oë nie. “Ek sê net ek het die inligting. Wanneer SWAT reg is, moet ons optree. Die bewyse is daar.” Hy vat ’n slukkie van sy koffie. “Ek het dit al uit verskeie oorde gehoor.”

Hulle het meer bewyse nodig as hoorsê, en Alex weet dit. Clay byt op sy tande en probeer hard om nie verder oor die onderwerp te gesels nie. Natuurlik weet die polisie van die ROA – hulle hoofkantoor en die omvang van dit wat hulle beplan om te doen. Maar hulle het nie die geringste fisiese bewys wat die groep met vorige eko-terrorisme verbind nie. Polisiemanne van die honde-eenheid is nie veronderstel om deel te wees van die ondersoek nie – nie totdat dit tyd geword het vir ’n soektog en inhegtenisname nie. Of hy nou deel is van die ondersoek al dan nie, Alex moet versigtig wees om sy vrye tyd daaraan te bestee om kamtige ondersoeke in te stel. Hy probeer om nie te kwaai te klink nie. “Ons het dit onder beheer, Brady. Ons hou dit fyn dop.”

Alex is stil, en hy kyk stip na Clay. “Hulle gaan Pasadena, die heuwels wat

oor die stad uitkyk, aanval? Is ek reg? Dit is wat die rondtes doen?”

Clay se hart klop vinniger, maar hy probeer hard om sy gesigsuitdrukking so te hou dat hy nie iets weggee nie. Alex Brady is goed. Hy was dalk nie by elke vergadering nie, maar hy ken die departement se grootste bekommernisse. Byna asof hy inligting van die binnekring kry. Clay drink sy koffie klaar, proe die paar korreltjies op die bodem van die koppie. “Met die publisiteit wat hulle met die laaste vuurseisoen gekry het, is dit seker dat daar hierdie jaar weer vure gaan uitbreek. Die ROA het aanhangers waarvan selfs hulle nie weet nie.”

“Ek dink SWAT is verkeerd. Ek dink nie dit gaan Pasadena wees nie, Sersant.” Sy stem word dieper en hy kyk na Joe. “Hulle het Malibu in gedagte, daardie nuwe ontwikkeling by Las Virgenes en Lost Hills ... Oak Canyon Estates. Die huise op daardie omheinde landgoed teen die heuwel.”

Selfs al is dit warm wil Clay ril by die gedagte. Tydens vergaderings het die hele SWAT-span byna elke liewe moontlikheid oorweeg vir die plekke waar brandstigting deur die ROA-lede kan plaasvind. Oak Canyon Estates is inderdaad genoem, maar niemand het die idee ernstig opgeneem nie. Die hekke sou brandstigters na-ure uithou, en selfs ’n groep so gek soos die ROA sal nie huise aan die brand steek terwyl mense in die omtrek is nie.

“Onmoontlik.” Clay hoor hy klink soos wanneer hy by die werk is, hy praat met die stem wat hy gebruik wanneer hy SWAT-lede oplei. “Waar jy ook al jou inligting vandaan kry, vergeet daarvan, Brady. Laat ons die leidrade volg. Wanneer die tyd reg is om mense in hegtenis te neem, sal jy daar wees.” Clay leun vooroor en klop Alex vrolik op die skouer. “Dit is jou dag af, my vriend. Ontspan.”

Alex knik stadig, in gedagte. “Goed dan.” Hy staan op en kyk eers na Joe, dan na Clay. “Ek moet gaan. Ek moet Bo by die huis kry.” Hy glimlag flou terwyl hy omdraai en deur toe stap. “Baie dankie vir vanaand.”

Clay voel gefrustreerd. Dit is allesbehalwe die deurbraak waarvoor hy vir God gevra het. “Ek is nou terug,” mompel hy vir Joe. Dan staan hy op en volg Alex na die skuifdeur. “Wag.”

Alex draai om. Hy glimlag nie meer nie. “Wat is ek veronderstel om te sê?” Sy stem is dringend, maar hy praat sag sodat net hulle kan hoor. “Ek is seker hiervan, Clay. Doodseker.”

“Daar is sekere kanale waardeur ons in die departement werk, Brady.” Clay voel eerder jammer vir hom as kwaad. “Laat ons toe om die leiding te neem. Ons weet wat ons doen; ek belowe jou.”

Alex kyk ’n oomblik lank stip na hom. “Wat as julle te laat is? Het jy al daaraan gedink?” Hy kyk in die rigting van die heuwels. “Daardie hele canyon is vol huise. Hierdie keer kan mense doodgaan. Baie mense.”

Weereens wil Clay nie te veel sê nie. Hy wil nie vir die jong polisieman sê dat die scenario wat hy nou net genoem het presies dit is waaroor hulle bekommerd is nie. Hy vat eerder aan Alex se boarm en hou dit vas soos ’n pa sy seun sal vashou. “Ons weet dit. Vertrou ons.”

Alex probeer nie wegbeur nie. Hy moes in Clay se stem gehoor het dat die gesprek verby is, en hy kyk af grond toe.

“Luister, Alex, wat pla jou? Die herdenking? Is dit wat pla?”

“Nee.” Alex kyk op en vir ’n oomblik is daar ’n wildheid in sy oë. “11 September is net nog ’n dag. Dit is maar net die volgende herdenking.” Hy slaan homself ’n paar keer op die bors. “Dit is wat my pla.”

“Goed dan.” Clay laat sak sy arm. “Ek is hier vir jou, Brady. Ek is hier as jy wil praat.”

Dit neem ’n oomblik vir Alex se woede om te verdwyn, en dan glimlag hy vinnig, net om te wys dat sy vasberadenheid nie op Clay gerig is nie, maar op die slegte mense. Dan draai hy om en Clay kyk hoe hy deur die huis loop, vinnig stop om vir Jamie dankie te sê en die ander vroue te groet. ’n Paar minute later hoor hy Alex se bakkie wat buite voor die huis wegtrek.

Joe het intussen by hom aangesluit op die stoep. Die twee kyk na die kinders wat mekaar in sirkels op die grasperk rondjaag en giggel, en elke paar treë neerval. “Jy weet wat dit is, nie waar nie?”

“Ja.” Clay weet dat hy vanaand verloor het. Hy het gehoop om Alex kerk toe te nooi, om betrokke te raak by die bediening vir enkellopendes. Maar hy is nog baie ver van daardie soort uitnodiging. “Die kind is vol seer.”

“Dit is maar slegs ’n deel daarvan.” Joe vou sy arms styf voor sy bors. “Vir Alex Brady is dit steeds 11 September.” Hy skud sy kop heen en weer. “Hy steek steeds vas by daardie Dinsdagoggend.”

Lank nadat hulle die kinders laat inkom het, en selfs nadat die paartjies om ’n tafel bymekaargekom het vir kaartspel, kan Clay nie Joe se woorde vergeet nie, hoe perfek hy Alex Brady se probleem opgesom het nie. Die polisieman het nog nooit aanbeweeg nie, nog nooit ’n weg gevind na ’n lewe sonder sy pa nie. Hy is wel 5 000 kilometer ver van New York af, maar nie in sy hart nie. En Clay is bevrees dat elke keer wanneer hy uitgeroep word, Alex weer die impak voel, die Twin Towers wat neerstort, die terroriste wat ’n groter oorwinning as ooit tevore het.

Soos die aand aanstap begin Clay vir die eerste keer Alex se obsessie met die ROA verstaan. In sekere opsigte is die groep byna dieselfde as die mense wat sy pa doodgemaak het. Dit is ’n ontnugterende gedagte, want die ROA is niks anders nie as ’n groep terroriste wie se wapen vuur is. Dieselfde wapen wat deur Al Qaeda gebruik is. ’n Wapen wat totale chaos kan veroorsaak en massiewe strukture in ’n kwessie van ’n paar minute kan vernietig, een wat die een ding kan doen wat Alex vrees dalk kan gebeur: Die lewe van onskuldige mense vernietig.

THREE

The round of cards was finished for a few minutes, and Jamie walked back to the kitchen to make another pot of coffee. Around the table everyone was still laughing about how no one should play the game with Clay and Joe at the same table. The two could read each other without words or table talk.

Wanda was talking louder than the others. “I mean, please! We girls never have a *chance* at winning with you two around.”

Jamie smiled to herself. She loved Wanda’s spirit and Laura’s quiet assurance. The three of them balanced each other, but even with all the excitement over the game, Jamie hadn’t been able to stop thinking of one very memorable moment from earlier in the night. The look in Alex’s eyes when the subject of 9/11 came up.

She moved to the fridge, took out the bag of fresh ground coffee, and measured the right amount into a new filter. Alex’s eyes had looked both haunted and familiar, the same look she’d seen hundreds of times before in the eyes of visitors at St. Paul’s Chapel — the little church that stood on the border of Ground Zero, the church where Jamie had volunteered her time for three years after her first husband Jake died in the terrorist attacks.

The stream of sorrow and heartache never ended at St. Paul’s, and it would’ve never ended for Jamie if Clay hadn’t walked into her life. She was better now, better here in Southern California, far from New York City with its scarred skyline.

Even still, the details were always close enough to touch. It was that way for anyone whose life had been changed by September 11. The tragedy created a bond that would remain among the survivors as long as they lived. So maybe God had brought Alex Brady into her life for a specific reason. She had moved on from St. Paul’s Chapel, but she would always have a heart for people hurt by 9/11. If she could talk to Alex, perhaps find a minute alone with him, he might open up about his feelings.

The condition of Alex’s heart reminded Jamie of something that happened to CJ last week. Their young son had run in from outdoors, whimpering about a

pain in his toe. Jamie took off the child's shoe and sock, and there on the bottom of his big toe was a red area, hot and infected. At the center, with skin grown over the top, was a splinter that was causing all the trouble. Jamie performed minor surgery on CJ that afternoon and removed the offending piece of wood. After a day, CJ's toe was healed and whole again.

It was that way with matters of the heart. Alex would find no healing, no ability to move on and live again or love again until he dealt with the splinter of hurt and anger that clearly festered inside him. Maybe that's where she could help.

Show me how, God ... Give me an opportunity and I'll talk to him.

No distinct answer resounded in her heart, but Jamie felt an assurance. Somehow, in the coming season, she had a strong feeling God would indeed use her in the life of Alex Brady. Now it was up to Him to show her how that would happen.

She removed the old coffee filter, tossed it in the trash, and refilled the machine with fresh water. Even after meeting for dinner a dozen times, Alex didn't know the details about Jamie's first husband, Jake. He didn't know about Wanda's FDNY husband, either. Clay hadn't thought the information was necessary, at least not in the early attempts at friendship with the young man. But now it had been nearly a year since the first time Clay invited Alex over for dinner.

Jamie flipped the switch, and the coffeemaker began gurgling and spewing. She turned around just as her brother-in-law entered the kitchen, his coffee mug in his hands. For the smallest fraction of a second, she caught herself thinking Eric was Jake. The resemblance was still so strong, so uncanny. She had long since come to accept the fact that she would have that fleeting thought at times — the same way that once in a while Sierra would make a particular play on the soccer field or come home with an A on an essay and Jamie would catch herself making a mental note to tell Jake.

"You look a world away." Eric came closer and leaned against the kitchen island counter, opposite her.

"Thinking about Alex."

"Hmm." He crossed one ankle over the other. "Me too. He hasn't dealt with it."

"Not at all." Jamie pushed herself up onto the counter next to the coffeemaker. "That's why he's a deputy. Trying to make sure no one else suffers the kind of loss he's gone through."

“The job’s bigger than he is.” Eric’s voice was marked by a familiar concern. “He needs to find a life outside work. The job’ll destroy him otherwise.” Eric set his cup down. “I know what you’re thinking.”

“What? You’re a mind reader now?” Her voice was lighter than before, proof that she wouldn’t linger in the past.

He could still look deep into her heart, and he did so now. “You think you can help him. The way you helped all those people at St. Paul’s.”

From the other room, the group was laughing again, but Jamie was quiet, letting the possibility drift in the air around them.

“Be careful.” He angled his face, his eyes shining with a tenderness that underlined the connection they shared. “God moved you on from St. Paul’s. Maybe Alex is supposed to be Clay’s project. Clay and Joe’s.”

“Why?” She didn’t feel defensive, but his thoughts surprised her. “Why not me?”

“Because it can consume you, Jamie. The way it did before.” He paused. “You and Clay, you have something very special. You deserve to live outside the shadow of the Twin Towers.”

The coffee finished percolating. Jamie slid her feet back down to the floor, took Eric’s mug, refilled it, and handed it back to him. As she did, she met Eric’s eyes and held them. “I’ll never be completely out of that shadow.” Her smile felt sad and small. “You should know that.”

Empathy flooded his face. “I do.” He touched the side of her arm. “Just be careful. Don’t risk what you have.”

His concern was genuine, and the warning hit its mark deep within her. “Thanks. I’ll watch myself. I’m just not sure someone like Clay or Joe can reach him, someone who doesn’t share that loss.”

Eric took his coffee and moved back toward the living room. “You’ll do the right thing, Jamie.” He left her with one last smile. “You always do.”

Jamie returned his smile, then grabbed hold of the fresh coffee. She carried it out to the others, refilled the cups of her husband and friends, and found her way back into another round of cards. But through the remainder of the night, as the game ended and the couples gathered their kids and said their good-byes, even later as she washed her face at her bathroom sink, she couldn’t shake the look in Alex’s eyes, or the warning from Eric.

Would it really hurt to give the young deputy a chance to open up about his

loss? Alex had no family in the area from what Clay knew, and even though Jamie was too young to be Alex's mother, she could take on the role for a short season, right? Or was Eric's concern valid, that she might become consumed once more with righting the wrongs meted out on 9/11?

Jamie pressed the warm washcloth to her face, wiping away the remains of her light makeup. The thoughts in her head all started because of the look in Alex's eyes ... A look of deep loss and pain mixed with a determination to find justice. Whatever the cost. The same look she'd seen in the eyes of the people who came through the doors at St. Paul's.

That's where she could help a guy like Alex. Because Jamie knew that sometimes the cost was too high, that a person could lose themselves in the quest to live for someone else, to devote one's days to redeeming the loss of someone you loved more than life. And that's what Alex was trying to do, at least it seemed that way. Live his life as a memorial to his father. Along the way, he was losing himself, and Jamie could certainly relate to that. Now if only God would show her the right time and place to share that truth with Alex.

Before his heart was so hard he wouldn't hear her anyway.

Hoofstuk 3

Die laaste rondte kaartspel is vir 'n paar minute verby en Jamie loop kombuis toe om nog 'n pot koffie te maak. Om die tafel is almal steeds besig om te lag oor hoe niemand die spel saam met Clay en Joe om dieselfde tafel moet speel nie. Die twee kan mekaar lees sonder woorde of tekens.

Wanda praat harder as die ander. "Ek bedoel, asseblief! Ons vroue sal nooit 'n kans hê om te wen met julle in die omtrek nie."

Jamie glimlag. Sy is mal oor Wanda se geestigheid en Laura se stil sekerheid. Hulle drie vul mekaar aan, maar selfs met al die opwindings rondom die kaartspel, kan Jamie nie ophou om aan een spesifieke oomblik vroeër die aand te dink nie. Die uitdrukking in Alex se oë toe hulle oor 11 September praat.

Sy loop yskas toe, haal die sakkie vars gemaalde koffiebone uit, en meet die regte hoeveelheid in 'n nuwe filtersakkie uit. Alex se oë het gelyk of iets by hom spook, maar daar was ook 'n bekende uitdrukking: dieselfde uitdrukking wat sy honderd maal tevore in die oë van besoekers by St. Paul's Chapel gesien het. Daar by die kerkie op die rand van Ground Zero, waar sy vir drie jaar haar tyd opgeoffer het nadat haar eerste man, Jake, in die terroriste-aanvalle oorlede is.

Die vloed van droefheid en hartseer het nooit opgehou by St. Paul's Chapel nie, en dit sou ook nooit vir Jamie opgehou het as Clay nie deel van haar lewe geword het nie. Dit gaan nou al beter met haar, hier in die suide van

Kalifornië, ver van New York met die gat waar die torings eens gestaan het. Tog is daardie dag nooit te ver om te onthou nie. En dit is die geval vir enigiemand wie se lewe deur 11 September verander is. Die tragedie het 'n band tussen die oorlewendes gevorm wat sal bly vir solank hulle leef. Miskien het God dus vir Alex Brady om 'n spesifieke rede deel van haar lewe gemaak. Sy het aanbeweeg ná St. Paul's Chapel, maar sy sal altyd 'n spesiale plekkie hê vir mense wat seer ervaar het as gevolg van 11 September. As sy net met Alex kan praat, miskien 'n minuut alleen saam met hom kan wees, sal hy dalk oor sy gevoelens praat.

Die toestand van Alex se hart herinner Jamie aan iets wat verlede week met CJ gebeur het. Hulle seuntjie het van buite af ingehardloop en gehuil oor sy toon wat seer is. Jamie het die kind se skoene en sokkie uitgetrek, en aan die onderkant van sy groottoon het sy 'n rooi kol gesien, warm van infeksie. In die middel, met vel wat al daarvoor gegroei het, was 'n splinter wat die moeilikheid veroorsaak het. Jamie het daardie middag 'n klein operasietjie op CJ uitgevoer en die splinter verwyder. Ná 'n dag was CJ se toon weer gesond en reg.

Dit is presies dieselfde met hartseer. Alex sal nie gesond word nie, nie aanbeweeg en weer leef of liefhê as hy nie die splinter verwyder wat hartseer en kwaad veroorsaak en heel duidelik in hom sweer nie. Miskien is dit waar sy kan help.

Wys vir my hoe, Here ... Gee vir my 'n geleentheid en ek sal met hom praat.

Daar is nie 'n duidelike antwoord in haar hart nie, maar Jamie voel 'n sekerheid. Sy het die gevoel dat God haar wel in die komende seisoen op die een of ander manier in Alex Brady se lewe sal gebruik. Hy moet nou net vir haar wys hoe dit gaan gebeur.

Sy haal die ou filtersakkie uit, gooi dit in die asblik, en maak die koffiemasjien vol vars water. Selfs nadat hy al 'n paar keer daar was vir ete, weet Alex niks van Jamie se eerste man, Jake, nie. Hy weet ook nie van Wanda se man wat deel was van die brandweer in New York nie. Clay het nie gedink die inligting is nodig nie, ten minste nie aan die begin van hulle vriendskap met die jong man nie. Dit is egter nou al amper 'n jaar sedert Clay vir Alex die eerste keer oorgenooi het vir ete.

Jamie skakel die koffiemasjien aan, en dit begin die water kook en koffie uitspoeg. Sy draai om net toe haar swaer by die kombuis instap met sy koffiebeker in die hand. Vir 'n oomblik dink sy Eric is Jake. Die ooreenkoms is steeds so sterk, so onheilspellend. Sy het lank reeds vrede gemaak met die feit dat sy soms so kan dink – net soos sy soms daaraan dink om vir Jake te vertel as Sierra goed sokker gespeel het of 'n A-simbool vir 'n opstel gekry het.

“Dit lyk of jy diep in gedagte is.” Eric kom nader en leun teen die kombuiskas.

“Ek dink aan Alex.”

“Hmm.” Hy kruis sy een enkel oor die ander een. “Ek ook. Hy het dit nog nie

verwerk nie.”

“Glad nie.” Jamie trek haarself op en gaan sit langs die koffiemasjien op die kombuiskas. “Dit is hoekom hy ’n polisieman is. Om seker te maak niemand anders ervaar dieselfde verlies as wat hy moes nie.”

“Maar dit neem sy hele lewe oor.” Daar is ’n bekende bekommernis in Eric se stem te bespeur. “Hy moet vir homself ’n lewe buite sy werk skep. Anders sal sy werk hom vernietig.” Eric sit sy koffiebeker neer. “Ek weet waaraan jy dink.”

“Wát? Kan jy my gedagtes lees?” Haar stem klink vroliker as voorheen, ’n bewys dat sy nie in die verlede leef nie.

Hy kan steeds diep in haar hart kyk, soos nou. “Jy dink jy kan hom help. Soos jy al daardie mense by St. Paul’s gehelp het.”

Uit die ander vertrek klink die ander se gelag op, maar Jamie is stil en dink aan die idee.

“Wees versigtig.” Hy draai sy kop skuins en uit sy oë straal ’n sagtheid wat dit wat hulle deel, beklemtoon. “God het jou van St. Paul’s weggeneem. Miskien is Alex veronderstel om Clay se projek te wees. Clay en Joe s’n.”

“Hoekom?” Sy is nie op die verdediging nie, maar sy idee verras haar. “Hoekom nie ek nie?”

“Omdat dit jou totaal kan verswelg, Jamie. Soos dit al vantevore gedoen het.” Hy bly ’n oomblik stil. “Jy en Clay het iets baie spesiaal. Julle verdien dit om buite die skaduwee van die Twin Towers te leef.”

Die koffie is klaar. Jamie klim van die kombuiskas af, vat Eric se beker, maak dit vol, en gee dit vir hom aan. Toe sy dit doen, ontmoet haar oë Eric s’n. “Ek sal nooit heeltemal buite daardie skaduwee leef nie.” Haar glimlag is klein en hartseer. “Jy behoort dit te weet.”

Empatie spoel oor sy gesig. “Ek weet.” Hy raak aan haar arm. “Wees net versigtig. Moenie dit wat julle het op die spel plaas nie.”

Hy is regtig bekommerd en sy slaan ag op sy waarskuwing. “Dankie. Ek sal versigtig wees. Ek is net nie seker dat iemand soos Clay of Joe, iemand wat nie die verlies deel, kan uitreik na hom nie.”

Eric vat sy koffie en loop terug na die leefvertrek. “Jy sal die regte ding doen, Jamie.” Dan glimlag hy weer vir haar. “Jy doen altyd.”

Jamie glimlag terug en tel die pot met vars koffie op. Sy dra dit na waar die ander sit en maak haar man en vriende se bekere vol. Dan gaan sit sy vir nog ’n rondte van kaartspel. Maar die res van die aand, toe hulle klaar kaart gespeel het en die paartjies hulle kinders bymekaarkry en totsiens sê, selfs later toe sy haar gesig was, kan sy nie die uitdrukking in Alex se oë of Eric se waarskuwing vergeet nie.

Sal dit regtig skade doen om die jong polisieman die geleentheid te gee om oor sy verlies te praat? Sover Clay weet, het Alex geen familie in die omgewing nie, en selfs al is Jamie te jonk om Alex se ma te wees, kan sy die rol vir ’n kort rukkie aanneem, of hoe? Of het Eric ’n punt beet: Kan sy dalk weer verswelg word deur die foute van 11 September te probeer regmaak?

Jamie druk die warm waslap teen haar gesig, en vee dit wat van haar ligte grimering oorgebly het weg. Die gedagtes in haar kop het alles begin met die uitdrukking in Alex se oë ... 'n Uitdrukking wat spreek van verlies en pyn, gemeng met die vasberadenheid om geregtigheid te laat geskied. Ten alle koste. Dieselfde uitdrukking wat sy in die oë van die mense gesien het wat by die deure van St. Paul's ingestap het.

Dit is waar sy iemand soos Alex kan help. Omdat Jamie weet die prys is soms te hoog om te betaal, dat iemand homself kan verloor in die strewe om namens iemand anders te leef, om jou dag daaraan toe te wy om te vergoed vir die verlies van iemand wat jy met jou hele hart liefgehad het. En dit is wat Alex probeer doen, of dit is hoe dit lyk. Om sy lewe te leef ter nagedagtenis aan sy pa. En mettertyd verloor hy homself, en daarmee kan Jamie haar definitief vereenselwig. As God net vir haar die regte tyd en plek kan wys om hierdie waarheid met Alex te deel. Voordat sy hart so hard is dat hy nie na haar sal luister nie.

FOUR

Holly Brooks turned onto the steep gravel road and slipped her transmission into the lowest possible gear, the way she did every day at this hour of the morning. Sales at Oak Creek Canyon's newest phase of development weren't exactly overwhelming, but with the summer heat letting up and September right around the corner, her office was busier than usual.

Brightly colored red and yellow flags waved in the wind as she made her way up the mountain road to the single paved street half a mile up. No matter how many times she made the drive, the view from the summit never got old. Holly parked her Durango and stared at the panorama spread out before her. The view skimmed along the tops of several smaller peaks and then ended with the Pacific Ocean spread out in the distance.

I know, Lord ... the created things are proof You're really there. She tried to remember what it felt like to believe, to accept the things of God as easily as she drew her next breath. But life was complicated now, and when she tried to remember that sort of faith, she felt empty and flat. As if she no longer knew how to believe. She grabbed her leather bag and a stack of work she'd taken home last night and looked once more at the sight before her. The heaviness that resided in her heart swelled. *Okay, so if You're real ... why can't I feel You anymore?*

The quiet whisper echoed through her soul and died there. She dismissed the thought and checked her face in the mirror one last time. As she climbed out, the wind grabbed her thick, blonde hair, whipped it across her face, and blew it in a dozen different directions. Wind meant one dreaded thing. She hesitated and checked the horizon for smoke, for any signs of fire. The developers had held a meeting last week expressing their concern about the coming fire season. She might only have lived in LA for a few years, but she was well aware of the Santa Ana winds and the danger faced every fall by Dave Jacobs and anyone with a personal or financial investment in the hillsides of Southern California.

Holly pressed her way through the wind to the front door of the middle estate. Her office was set up in the front room of one of the most beautiful models in

the new development. The house was enormous — more than seven thousand square feet — with no luxury spared. She slipped her key in the front door. The developers were here somewhere, overseeing construction on one of the eight spec homes being built up and down the spacious street on either side of the model.

It was an honor working for Dave. He was six-foot-two, with a presence that inspired loyalty and made other people want to catch his vision. And his vision was a great one. Never mind the criticism from environmentalists that was bound to come when a person spent his days developing the hillsides of Southern California. Away from his development company, Dave was involved in more charities than Holly could count. Every year he provided the material and labor for the construction of three houses for homeless families in the San Fernando Valley, and without fail he was the recipient of a number of philanthropic awards. With all that, his greatest moments were with his family — his wife, Lois, and their four children. With his wealth, he could've traveled the world. But his favorite vacations were simple and profound — trips to Michigan's Upper Peninsula where Dave would bird-watch and return to his work full of nature stories. No, his critics — especially the environmentalists — didn't have a clue who Dave Jacobs really was.

Holly set her things down. She would see Dave and his son, Ron, around lunchtime, but until then she would work alone. Something she liked least about her job.

She flipped a few buttons on the keypad just outside her office. Immediately, something by Rod Stewart worked its way from speakers hidden discreetly throughout the estate. Holly liked this radio station. It played the oldies her mother listened to, music that reminded her of home back on Staten Island. Holly turned up the music and sang along.

"Have I told you lately, that I love you ... Have I told you, there's no one else above you ..." The song reminded Holly of her dad. Long before his heart attack two summers ago, he seemed to know he didn't have long to live. He had called her up one day and told her that whenever he heard this song, he thought of his family. Holly turned her attention to her work. Two years might've passed since his death, but his memory still moved her to tears. It always would.

Just not here at work. She steeled herself against the loneliness and began filing the work she'd brought. She was twenty-five and single, heading toward a serious relationship with the developer's son, Ron. But nothing about her life was how she pictured it when she was in high school, back when she knew without a doubt that she and Alex would be married and having babies by now, back when nothing could've torn them apart.

Back before 9/11.

Holly hurried herself along. She had four appointments today, not counting walk-ins. Each would require a detailed tour, paperwork, and a discussion on financing. On top of that, there were follow-up calls to make and more documents to file. She was checking her calendar when a black Mercedes sedan drove up. Holly hadn't seen the car before, so she could only assume the obvious. Prospective buyers. She glanced at the decorative flags that marked the walkway to the front door. They weren't flapping as hard. Good. The wind had died down some.

The two men climbed out of the car and headed up the walk, both of them with straight backs and tailored suits, sure signs of their status in the business world. Holly met them at the front door, introduced herself, and welcomed them in. "How can I help you?"

"Actually, you can help *me*. My brother's just sort of along for the ride." The taller of the two pointed an elbow toward the bald man with him. "We work together and met for coffee this morning. I decided to show him what I'd found up here."

Holly tried to place the man. Anyone who had been through the model home or toured the neighborhood had to go through her. When she wasn't giving tours, the gates were shut at the base of the road, and no one could gain access up. "Have you been through before?"

The man chuckled. "Not officially." He held out his hand. "I'm Sam Baker. My wife and I drove by last weekend, but there were six other couples taking up your time." He grinned. "I told her I'd come check it out today, and if I liked it I could bring her back later."

Holly was surprised and slightly uneasy, but she didn't show it. Not once in the past few weeks had she been too busy to give a potential buyer the tour. There might've been one other couple walking the grounds, or even two, but six? Not lately. Still, she motioned for the men to follow her. "Let's take a look at the site map." She led them to a dramatic, glass-covered model of the development. "As you can see, only two of the homes in Phase Two are sold." She crossed the room and led them to a second detailed model. "The previous phase was larger. Twenty-five homes." She pointed to a cul-de-sac area. "Five homes remain for sale in that phase, but none of them have the views of Phase Two." *Or the sticker price*, but Holly didn't mention that.

The men stared a little closer at the second model and talked quietly between themselves. Holly was used to this, giving her customers plenty of alone time to talk openly about their likes and dislikes. But as the men talked, Holly noticed the shoes of the taller man. He wore beat-up tan loafers — the kind

more suited for Dockers or jeans. *Strange*, she thought. Most business men shopping for homes in this price range wore the right shoes. Dark wing tips, fine Italian leather. She let the observation pass. "I'll go put together a packet for you." She smiled at the other man. He wore his baldness in an intentional sort of way. "Would you like one also?"

"Uh," he looked at his brother and shrugged, "sure. If you don't mind."

"Absolutely not." She returned to her office, but as she was putting the two packets together, her strange feeling about the men remained. She picked up her radio, the one that would signal the developers that she needed their help if any trouble arose in the model home. She clipped it to her belt and tried to get her mind around what it was about the men that bothered her. Maybe the one named Sam was trying to impress his kid brother, make it seem like he was on the verge of purchasing a five-million-dollar home. She'd certainly caught people lying about being in this affordability bracket. Whatever the reason, she was sure of one thing.

She'd never seen him up here before.

Holly returned to the men and handed them each a packet. By then they were fairly focused on the newer phase. "I don't have an appointment for another hour." She looked from Sam to his brother. "Do you have time for a tour?"

"Definitely." Sam smiled. "Tell me, what protection do these homes have against fires? The bigger brushfires?"

Something about the way he asked the question sent a chill down Holly's back. "Well," the question was a strange one, not the usual curiosity about square footage and lot sizes. But maybe because of the wind ... "We have a sprinkler system around the perimeter of the development, and fireproof tile roofs on every house." She led them toward the front of the house. "Homeowners' dues will provide for brush clearing on an annual basis. That sort of thing."

She chastised herself for letting the man's question distract her. "Let's take a look through this estate first." She moved toward a sweeping staircase, marked by distinctly designed cherry wood and set against an entire wall of wainscoting and detailed high-end molding. "We call this model *Bella Noche*." For the next twenty minutes she led the men through the house, describing more than a hundred features, forcing them to linger in the rooms with the most breathtaking views.

The whole time she felt strangely nervous. Maybe because the men hadn't had an appointment, or because of the question about fire or the way the taller man's shoes didn't work with his look. Whatever it was, something about

them didn't add up. She kept her hand close to her radio, ready in case the men threatened her in any way. But as the tour came to a close, Holly felt herself relax. The men were talking like any other potential buyers, going on about the benefits of being up here in the hills versus on the valley floor closer to the freeways, and wondering about whether this model or the one next door would better suit their needs.

"You have children?" Holly held her clipboard to her chest as they walked slowly toward the front door.

"Three, and they need all the space they can get." He rolled his eyes. "They don't exactly like each other."

"That's an understatement." His bald brother gave Holly a knowing look. "What is the square footage in the other models?"

"They range from sixty-five hundred to just under ten thousand." She felt proud of the fact. Not that she'd ever be able to afford anything close to the homes she sold, but the developers had done a brilliant job with Phase Two. Each estate took advantage of the limited flat land, and included oversized windows that let in every possible view.

Holly still had time, so she led the men outside and along the walkway that ran in front of the entire street of homes. At the end she pointed to the largest of the homes, one that was just being framed. "That's *Bella Grande*, the most spacious property in this phase."

The men seemed to take careful note of the place. "Sits right in the hillside." Sam seemed impressed with the fact.

"The developers made the best use of the natural topography, while maintaining a building pad large enough to include half-acre front and side yards.

"You have a picture of the place?" Sam's brother opened the packet he'd been carrying and thumbed through the glossy material inside.

"Yes. You'll find every model represented in the brochure." She pointed down the street. "The homes at that end will be finished first. The others have a completion date of next spring."

With that, the brothers seemed satisfied. Holly was walking with them back to the black Mercedes when Sam turned to her as if he'd just remembered a final thought. "I'd like to bring my wife up. How late are you here?"

"This is my long shift." She caught her hair in one hand so the wind couldn't whip it against her face. "I'll be here until nine o'clock, same as the late work

crew.”

Sam smiled. “Very good. Look for us sometime after dinner.” The men left, and five minutes later Holly’s first appointment showed up — a couple in their late fifties, with their realtor in tow. The hours melted away, and it was two o’clock before she knew it, the time each day when the developers took a break and met at the model home for lunch and an update on the sales prospects.

Ron Jacobs was the first through the door, followed by his father and a team of assistants. He found Holly in her office organizing a stack of follow-up sheets. “Hey ...” she stood, her voice soft. “How’s the building going?”

He leaned against the doorframe of her office and smiled at her. “With everything my dad’s built in these hills, this is it, Holly. The crown jewel. Best of the best.” He came closer and reached for her hand. His fingers felt sweaty, the way they often did. “You were busy this morning.”

She told him about the two brothers and about the others who had come with appointments. “The one guy, Sam Baker, will be back tonight with his wife.”

“Good.” Ron gave her hand a quick squeeze and released it. “That’s what we’re looking for. Return visits.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek. “You’re beautiful.” He brushed a strand of hair off her face. “The windblown look suits you.”

Her cheeks warmed under his gaze. “I’ll be out in the kitchen in a minute.”

“I have a few subs to check on, but we can spend the last few hours together. If you don’t get too many walk-ins.”

Holly nodded and waited for him to leave. As he did, she exhaled and stared at the pile of papers on the desk in front of her. Ron was a generally attractive man. Kind and diligent, a churchgoer who didn’t ask more from her than she was willing to give. But he was a decade older than her and never married, a man for whom work and helping others came before anything else. Every other night there was a charity auction or benefit dinner, something that drew the attention of both father and son.

The one difference between Ron and his father was that Ron had never wanted marriage and a family. Development was his true love, something even he joked about. Holly had known Ron since she’d been hired by the company, but in the past year he’d shown a change of heart in his priorities. He’d stay late just to talk to her, and sometimes on slow afternoons he’d tell her that he was beginning to believe there had to be more to life than building beautiful homes and attending charity events.

Indeed.

Holly pulled a rubber band from the top desk drawer, gathered her hair behind her, and pulled it into a ponytail that hung halfway down her back. She cared about Ron, she did. No one else had come along, and there was no point living in the past, so maybe this was it — the man her parents had prayed for all those years when she was growing up. She wiped her still-damp hand on her black dress slacks and sighed.

At the same time, something caught her eye, a photo on the front page of the *Times'* Metro section. Even from this angle there was something familiar about the build of the man in the picture. Earlier she'd been too busy to even glance at the headlines, but now she rolled her chair to the left a few inches and as she did, the photo came into view. She gasped before she could stop herself.

Her lungs couldn't process the breath and again she tried to breathe while her heart dropped to the floor. The picture showed a stern-faced sheriff's deputy standing at attention, a trophy in his hand. Beside him was a stoic-looking German shepherd, his ears forward, body rigid and alert. Holly let her eyes fall to the caption beneath the photo because she had to see it, had to read his name in print before she could actually believe it. And there it was.

Los Angeles Sheriff's Deputy Alex Brady and his K9 partner, Bo, receive an award for excellence at a recent ceremony. Her eyes moved back to his, and she felt her heart limp slowly back to place. If it weren't for the distinct angles of his face and the way he held his broad shoulders back, she wouldn't have had a clue who he was. His eyes were so hard it hurt to look at him.

She brought the paper a little closer and studied him. *Oh, Alex ... you never made it back, did you?* Tears blurred her vision, and she blinked so she could read the rest of the caption. It wasn't long, not even a complete story. Just the fact that Alex and Bo had made more arrests than any other K9 team in the department for the second straight year. The only quote from Alex was a brief one. "I'm doing what I love."

Holly looked at him once more. The eyes of the Alex Brady she had known had been filled with light, same as his face. That Alex had spent his Sunday mornings at church and his weekends taking her on long walks, laughing over *Fresh Prince* re-runs, and whispering on the phone until late at night ... No one could dampen the life that spilled into everything they did together. Holly allowed herself to remember those years like she rarely remembered them anymore. There had been a time when she could look into Alex's eyes and easily know who he loved and what he loved and how much he loved.

But now? No matter what he said to the reporter, Alex's expression told a

different story. That he didn't love anything or anyone at all. She took a last look at the paper, folded it carefully in half, and slid it into her bag for later. Still, even as she tried to tuck the memories away into the shadowy corners of her heart, they came back to life.

As vivid as they'd been in the days after 9/11.

Hoofstuk 4

Holly Brooks draai af op die steil grondpad en verander oor na die laagste rat, soos sy elke oggend hierdie tyd doen. Verkope by Oak Creek Canyon se nuutste fase in die ontwikkeling is nie regtig oorweldigend nie, maar met die somertemperatuur wat styg en September net om die draai, is haar kantoor besiger as gewoonlik.

Helderkleurige rooi-en-geel vlaggies wapper in die wind terwyl sy teen die berg opry na die enigste teerpad sowat agt honderd meter vorentoe. Dit maak nie saak hoeveel keer sy hierdie paadjie ry nie, die uitsig hier van bo bly pragtig. Holly parkeer haar motor en staar na die panoramiese uitsig voor haar. In die verte kan 'n paar bergspitse gesien word en dit eindig met die Stille Oseaan wat voor haar uitgestrek lê.

Ek weet, Here ... dit wat U geskape het, is 'n bewys dat U werklik bestaan. Sy probeer onthou hoe dit voel om te glo, om die dinge van God te aanvaar so maklik soos dit is om asem te haal. Maar die lewe is nou moeilik, en wanneer sy probeer om daardie tipe geloof te onthou, voel sy leeg en afgemat. Dit is asof sy nie meer weet hoe om te glo nie. Sy kry haar leertas en 'n stapeltjie papierwerk wat sy gisteraand huis toe gevat het, en kyk weer na die uitsig voor haar. Die swaarmoedigheid in haar hart groei steeds. Goed, so as U 'n werklikheid is, hoekom kan ek U nie meer voel nie?

Die sagte fluistering eggo deur haar siel en sterf weg. Sy vergeet daarvan en kyk 'n laaste keer na haar gesig in die spieëltjie. Toe sy uitklim, waai die wind deur haar dik blonde hare, waai dit in haar gesig en in duisend verskillende rigtings. Wind beteken net een gevreesde ding. Sy aarsel en kyk na die horison vir rook, vir enige teken van 'n brand. Die ontwikkelaars het verlede week 'n vergadering gehou waartydens hulle hul bekommernis oor die komende vuurseisoen uitgedruk het. Sy bly dalk nog net 'n paar jaar in Los Angeles, maar sy ken die Santa Ana-winde en die gevaar wat elke herfs ervaar word deur Dave Jacobs en enigiemand met 'n persoonlike of finansiële belegging in die heuwels in die suide van Kalifornië.

Holly beur teen die wind na die voordeur van die middelste huis. Haar kantoor is in die voorste vertrek van een van die mooiste skouhuise in die nuwe ontwikkeling. Die huis is baie groot, meer as ses honderd en dertig vierkante meter, alles baie luuks. Sy steek haar sleutel in die voordeur se sleutelgat. Die ontwikkelaars is hier iewers besig om 'n ogie te hou oor een van die agt huise wat al langs die wye straat aan albei kante van die skouhuis gebou word.

Dit is 'n eer om vir Dave te werk. Hy is 'n lang man met 'n teenwoordigheid wat jou inspireer om lojaal te wees en ander aanspoor om sy visie te sien. En sy visie is groot. Ongeag die kritiek wat gewis van omgewingsbewustes sou kom wanneer iemand die heuwels in die suide van Kalifornië ontwikkel. Buiten sy ontwikkelingsmaatskappy is Dave betrokke by meer liefdadigheidswerk as wat Holly kan opnoem. Hy voorsien elke jaar die materiaal en werkers om drie huise vir daklose gesinne in die San Fernando-vallei te bou, en hy het nou al 'n klomp filantropiese toekennings ontvang. Daarmee saam is van sy beste tye tyd wat hy saam met sy gesin deurbring – Lois en hulle vier kinders. Met sy rykdom kan hy die wêreld deurkruis. Maar sy gunsteling vakansies is eenvoudig – reise na Michigan se skiereiland waar Dave voëlkyk beoefen. Daarna kom hy vol natuurstories terug huis toe. Nee, kritici, veral omgewingsbewustes, het glad nie 'n benul wie Dave Jacobs eintlik is nie.

Holly sit haar goed neer. Sy sal Dave en sy seun, Ron, teen etenstyd sien, maar tot dan gaan sy alleen werk. Iets wat haar werk betref waarvan sy die minste hou.

Sy druk 'n paar knoppies op die sleutelbord net buite haar kantoor. Onmiddellik begin 'n liedjie van Rod Stewart speel vanuit luidsprekers wat omsigtig weggesteek is deur die huis. Holly hou van hierdie radiostasie. Hulle speel ou liedjies, dié waarna haar ma geluister het, musiek wat haar aan haar huis op Staten Island herinner. Holly draai die musiek harder en sing saam.

“Have I told you lately, that I love you ... Have I told you, there's no one else above you ...” Die liedjie herinner Holly aan haar pa. Lank voor sy hartaanval twee jaar gelede, het dit gelyk of hy weet hy gaan nie meer lank leef nie. Hy het haar eendag gebel en gesê dat wanneer hy hierdie liedjie hoor, hy aan sy gesin dink. Holly bepaal weer haar aandag by haar werk. Daar het dalk twee jaar verloop sedert sy dood, maar sy wil steeds huil wanneer sy aan hom dink. Sy sal altyd.

Net nie hier by die werk nie. Sy staal haarself teen die alleenheid en begin om die werk wat sy saamgebring het uit te sorteer. Sy is vyf en twintig en 'n alleenloper, en besig om in 'n ernstige verhouding met die ontwikkelaar se seun, Ron, betrokke te raak. Maar haar lewe is glad nie soos sy haarself op hoërskool voorgestel het nie, toe sy sonder twyfel geweet het sy en Alex gaan trou en teen hierdie tyd al kinders hê, in die dae toe niks hulle uitmekaar kon skeur nie.

Dit was voor 11 September.

Holly jaag haarself aan. Sy het vandag vier afsprake, om nie eers te praat van die mense wat sonder 'n afspraak daar opdaag nie. Sy moet vir elkeen 'n toer gee in die fynste besonderhede, papierwerk afhandel en finansiering bespreek. Daarmee saam moet sy opvolg-oproep maak en nog dokumente liasseer. Sy is besig om haar dagboek na te gaan toe 'n swart Mercedes daar aangery kom. Holly het die motor nog nie vantevore gesien nie, en sy neem die vanselfsprekende aan: voornemende kopers. Sy kyk na die vlaggies al langs

die paadjie wat na die voordeur loop. Hulle wapper nie meer so vinnig nie. Goed so. Die wind het effens gaan lê.

Die twee mans klim uit die motor en loop met die paadjie langs, albei penregop met snyerspakke aan, 'n teken van hulle status in die sakewêreld. Holly ontvang hulle by die voordeur, stel haarself voor en verwelkom hulle. "Waarmee help ek julle?"

"Eintlik kan jy my help. My broer het sommer net saamgekom." Die langer een wys met sy elmboog in die rigting van die kaalkopman langs hom. "Ons werk saam en het vanoggend vir koffie ontmoet. Ek het besluit om vir hom te wys wat ek hierbo ontdek het."

Holly probeer die man plaas. Enigiemand wat na die skouhuis kom kyk of deur die buurt ry, moet deur haar werk. As sy nie toere aanbied nie, word die hekke aan die onderkant van die pad gesluit, en niemand kan hierbo kom nie. "Was julle al voorheen hier?"

Die man lag. "Nie amptelik nie." Hy steek sy hand na haar toe uit. "Ek is Sam Baker. Ek en my vrou het verlede naweek hier omgery, maar daar was ses ander paartjies wat jou besig gehou het." Hy glimlag. "Ek het vir haar gesê ek sal vandag kom kyk, en as ek daarvan hou sal ek haar later bring."

Holly is verras en voel effens ongemaklik, maar sy wys dit nie. Nie een keer in die afgelope paar weke was sy te besig om potensieële kopers rond te wys nie. Daar was dalk nog 'n paartjie op die grond, miskien twee, maar ses? Nie onlangs nie. Tog wys sy vir die mans om haar te volg. "Kom ons kyk na die oorsigkaart." Sy lei hulle na 'n dramatiese model van die ontwikkeling met glas daaroor. "Soos julle kan sien, is slegs twee van die huise in fase twee verkoop." Sy loop na die ander kant van die vertrek en lei hulle na 'n tweede gedetailleerde model. "Die eerste fase was groter. Vyf en twintig huise." Sy wys na 'n cul de sac-area. "Vyf huise in daardie fase is steeds te koop, maar nie een van hulle het die uitsig van fase twee nie." *Of die hoër prys nie*, maar Holly noem dit nie.

Die mans bekyk die tweede model van naderby en praat saggies met mekaar. Holly is gewoonnd hieraan, om haar kliënte baie alleentyd te gee om openlik te praat oor dit waarvan hulle hou en nie hou nie. Maar terwyl die mans praat, trek die langer man se skoene Holly se aandag. Hy het informele leerskoene aan, die soort wat 'n mens eerder by 'n denim sal aantrek. *Dis vreemd*, dink sy. Die meeste sakemanne wat na huise in hierdie prysklas kom kyk, het die regte skoene aan. Donker spitspunte van Italiaanse leer. Maar sy vergeet vinnig daarvan. "Ek sal gou vir julle al die inligting kry." Sy glimlag vir die ander man. "Sal meneer dit ook wil hê?"

"Hmm," hy kyk na sy broer en haal sy skouers op. "Ja, as jy nie omgee nie."

"Glad nie." Sy gaan na haar kantoor toe, maar terwyl sy die twee pakkies inligting bymekaarsit, het sy 'n vreemde gevoel oor die mans. Sy tel die radio op, die een waarmee sy die ontwikkelaars kan laat weet as sy hul hulp nodig het, wanneer daar moeilikheid by die skouhuis is. Sy maak dit aan haar gordel vas en probeer vasstel wat dit omtrent die mans is wat haar pla. Miskien

probeer die een, Sam, sy jonger broer beïndruk, sodat dit lyk of hy van plan is om 'n huis van miljoene dollars te koop. Sy het definitief al mense uitgevang wat lieg en nie die prys kan betaal nie. Maar dit maak nie saak wat die rede is nie, van een ding is sy seker: Sy het hom nog nooit hier gesien nie.

Holly loop weer na die mans toe en gee vir hulle elkeen 'n pakkie met inligting. Nou val hul fokus op die nuwe fase. “Ek het eers oor 'n uur 'n afspraak.” Sy kyk van Sam na sy broer. “Het julle tyd dat ek julle kan rondwys?”

“Definitief.” Sam glimlag. “Sê vir my, watter beskerming bied hierdie huise teen vuur? Teen groter veldbrande?”

Iets omtrent die manier waarop hy die vraag vra, laat Holly ril. “Wel,” dit is 'n vreemde vraag, nie die gewone vrae oor die huise se oppervlakte en die grootte van die grond nie. Maar miskien vanweë die wind ... “Ons het 'n besproeiingstelsel al langs die grensdrade van die ontwikkeling, en daar is vuurbestande dakteëls op al die huise.” Sy lei hulle na die voorkant van die huis. “Huiseienaars se geld sal op 'n jaarlikse basis betaal vir ontbossing. Daardie soort ding.”

Sy is kwaad vir haarself dat die man se vraag haar aandag so aflei. “Kom ons kyk eers na hierdie huis.” Sy loop na groot ontwerperstrap van kersiehout wat al langs 'n muur van paneelwerk op loop. “Ons noem hierdie model *Bella Noche*.”

Vir die volgende twintig minute begelei sy die mans deur die huis, beskryf honderd kenmerke, en dwing hulle om genoeg tyd te verwyd in die vertrekke met die asemrowendste uitsigte.

Vreemd genoeg voel sy die hele tyd op haar senuwees. Miskien omdat die mans nie 'n afspraak gehad het nie, of dalk is dit die vraag oor brande of die manier waarop die langer man se skoene nie by sy uitrusting pas nie. Wat dit ook al is, iets omtrent hulle is vreemd. Sy hou haar hand na aan haar radio, gereed vir in geval die mans enigsins vir haar 'n bedreiging is. Maar teen die einde van die toer, voel Holly hoe sy ontspan. Die mans praat oor dieselfde dinge as ander voornemende kopers. Hulle praat oor die voordele om hier in die heuwels te bly eerder as in die vallei nader aan die deurpaaie, en oor of hierdie model of die een langsaan beter by hulle behoeftes gaan pas.

“Het julle kinders?” Holly hou haar knyperbord teen haar bors terwyl hulle stadig na die voordeur toe loop.

“Drie, en hulle het al die spasie nodig wat hulle kan kry.” Hy rol sy oë. “Hulle hou nie eintlik van mekaar nie.”

“Dit is ligtelik gestel.” Sy kaalkopbroer knik in Holly se rigting. “Wat is die oppervlakte van die ander huise?”

“Dit wissel van vyf en vyftig tot net minder as duisend vierkante meter.” Sy is trots daarop. Nie dat sy ooit 'n huis sal kan bekostig soos dié wat sy verkoop nie, maar die ontwikkelaars het briljante werk gedoen met fase twee. Elke huis maak ten beste gebruik van die stuk grond waarop dit gebou is en het baie groot vensters wat 'n mens elke moontlike uitsig bied.

Holly het nog 'n paar minute oor; daarom loop sy saam met die mans na buite en al langs die paadjie wat voor die huise in die straat verbyloop. Aan die einde van die paadjie wys sy na die grootste huis waar hulle besig is om die kosyne op te sit. “Dit is *Bella Grande*, die grootste huis in hierdie fase.”

Dit lyk of die mans die plek deeglik bestudeer. “Dit is in die middel van die heuwelagtige gebied geleë.” Sam lyk beïndruk met die feit.

“Die ontwikkelaars het die beste gebruik gemaak van die topografie terwyl hulle groot genoeg spasie oorgelaat het om 'n groterige tuin voor en aan die kante te hê.”

“Het jy dalk 'n foto van die plek?” Sam se broer maak die inligtingspakkie wat hy rondra oop en blaai deur die blink blaaie binne-in.

“Ja. Daar is foto's van elke huis in die brosjure.” Sy wys met haar vinger in die straat af. “Die huise aan daardie kant sal eerste klaar wees. Die ander sal in die lente voltooi wees.”

Dit lyk of die broers tevrede is. Holly loop saam met hulle na die swart Mercedes en toe draai Sam na haar asof hy 'n laaste vraag onthou het. “Ek sal graag my vrou hierheen wil bring. Tot hoe laat is jy hier?”

“Dit is my lang skof.” Sy vat haar hare in haar een hand vas sodat die wind dit nie in haar gesig kan waai nie. “Ek is hier tot nege-uur, tot die laaste werkers loop.”

Sam glimlag. “Dis gaaf. Wees ná ete op die uitkyk vir ons.” Die mans ry weg en vyf minute later daag die mense vir Holly se eerste afspraak op – 'n paartjie in hulle laat vyftigs. Die oggend gaan vinnig verby en voor sy haar kan kry, is dit twee-uur, die tyd wanneer die ontwikkelaars vir ete na die skouhuis gaan en die nuutste inligting omtrent die stand van verkope kry.

Ron Jacobs kom eerste in, en dan volg sy pa en die span assistente. Hy kry vir Holly in haar kantoor waar sy besig is om papierwerk van opvolgwerk uit te sorteer. “Haai ... ” sy staan op, haar stem sag. “En hoe gaan dit met die bouwerk?”

Hy leun teen haar kantoor se deurkosyn en glimlag vir haar. “Van alles wat my pa al in hierdie heuwels gebou het, is hierdie die grote, Holly. Die kroonjuweel. Die beste van die beste.” Hy loop nader en vat haar hand. Sy vingers voel sweterig, soos dit dikwels voel. “Jy was besig vanoggend.”

Sy vertel hom van die twee broers en van die ander mense wat afsprake gehad het. “Die een man, Sam Baker, sal vanaand saam met sy vrou kom.”

“Goed so.” Ron gee haar hand 'n vinnige drukkie en los dit dan. “Dit is wat ons wil hê. Mense wat terugkom.” Hy leun vooroor en soen haar wang. “Jy is pragtig.” Hy vee haar hare uit haar gesig. “Die windverwaaide voorkoms pas by jou.”

Haar wange gloei terwyl hy na haar kyk. “Ek gaan nou-nou kombuis toe kom.”

“Ek moet nog 'n paar dingetjies afhandel, maar ons kan die res van die dag saam deurbring as hier nie te veel besoekers is nie.”

Holly knik en wag vir hom om te loop. Toe hy uitloop asem sy uit en staar na

die hope papiere op die lessenaar voor haar. Ron is nogal 'n aantreklike man. Goedhartig en hardwerkend, iemand wat kerk bywoon en nie meer van haar vra as wat sy bereid is om te gee nie. Maar hy is tien jaar ouer as sy en nog nooit getroud nie, iemand wat werk en om ander te help altyd eerste sal stel. Daar is gereeld die een of ander liefdadigheidsveiling of -funksie wat die pa en seun se aandag trek.

Die een verskil tussen Ron en sy pa is dat Ron nooit wou trou of 'n gesin wou hê nie. Ontwikkeling was sy eerste liefde, iets waaroor selfs hy al gespot het. Holly ken hom sedert sy by die maatskappy begin werk het, maar gedurende die afgelope jaar het sy prioriteite begin verander. Hy sal laat bly om met haar te praat, en soms wanneer hy nie te besig is nie, sal hy vir haar sê dat hy begin glo daar is meer in die lewe as om pragtige huise te bou en liefdadigheidsfunksies by te woon.

En dit is inderdaad so.

Holly haal 'n rekkie uit die lessenaar se boonste laai, kry al haar hare bymekaar en maak 'n poniestert wat tot in die middel van haar rug hang. Sy gee werklik om vir Ron. Daar is niemand anders in haar lewe nie en daar is ook geen nut daarin om in die verlede te leef nie, so dalk is hy die een – die man vir wie haar ouers gebid het tydens haar grootwordjare. Sy vee haar klam hand aan die agterkant van haar swart rok af en sug.

Terselfdertyd vang iets haar oog, 'n foto op die voorblad van die koerant. Selfs uit hierdie hoek is daar iets bekend aan die bou van die man in die foto. Vroeër was sy te besig om selfs na die hooftrekke te loer, maar nou beweeg sy haar stoel 'n bietjie na links en die foto kom in fokus. Sy snak na haar asem voordat sy haarself kan keer.

Dit is asof sy nie kan asemhaal nie en haar hart begin vinniger klop. In die foto is 'n polisieman wat op aandag staan met 'n ernstige uitdrukking op sy gesig en 'n trofee in sy hand. Langs hom sit 'n Duitse Herdershond, kalm, sy ore vorentoe gedraai, sy lyf regop en wakker. Holly se oë kyk na die onderskrif onder die foto, want sy moet dit sien, sy moet sy naam lees voordat sy dit kan glo. En daar is dit.

Die polisieman Alex Brady van Los Angeles en sy honde-kollega, Bo, het 'n toekennning vir uitnemendheid ontvang by 'n onlangse geleentheid. Haar oë beweeg terug na syne, en sy voel hoe haar hart stadig maar seker weer ritmies begin klop. As dit nie was vir sy sterk gesig en die manier hoe sy breë skouers na agter druk nie, sou sy nie geweet het dit is hy nie. Sy oë is so emosieloos dit maak seer om na hom te kyk.

Sy hou die koerant effens nader en bestudeer hom. *Ai, Alex ... jy het nooit teruggegaan nie, het jy?* Trane vul haar oë en sy knip dit om die res van die onderskrif te lees. Dit is nie 'n lang berig nie, nie eers die hele storie nie. Hulle sê net dat Alex en Bo vir die tweede jaar agtereenvolgens meer mense in hegtenis geneem het as enige ander span van die honde-eenheid. Die enigste aanhaling van Alex is kort en kragtig. “Ek doen waarvoor ek lief is.”

Holly kyk nog 'n keer na hom. Die Alex Brady wat sy geken het se oë was

helder, net soos sy gesig. Daardie Alex het Sondagoggende kerk toe gegaan en oor naweke saam met haar gaan stap, gelag wanneer hulle TV gekyk het en oor die foon gefluister tot laat in die nag ... Niemand kon die geluk wegneem wat deel was van alles wat hulle saam gedoen het nie. Holly laat haarself toe om terug te dink aan daardie jare soos sy dit selde onthou. Daar was 'n tyd wat sy in Alex se oë kon kyk en presies kon weet wie, wat en hoeveel hy liefhet.

Maar nou? Dit maak nie saak wat hy vir die verslaggewer gesê het nie, Alex se uitdrukking vertel 'n ander storie. Dat hy niks of niemand liefhet nie. Sy kyk vir 'n laaste keer na die koerant, vou dit versigtig in die helfte en sit dit in haar sak om later te lees. Al probeer sy die herinneringe wegstoot tot in die donker hoeke van haar hart, bly dit terugkom. So helder as wat dit was net ná 11 September.

FIVE

As far as Holly could tell, the change in Alex happened as soon as he got the news about the Twin Towers collapsing. Alex became a different person overnight, as if a piece of him had been buried in the rubble of Ground Zero.

She went to his house the morning of September 12, and his mother answered the door. The two of them hugged and cried, muttering about how maybe Alex's dad was alive, and maybe he would be rescued any minute. Finally, Holly took a few steps back and looked into the other room. Alex was sitting on the sofa, staring at the television. His eyes were red, his cheeks tearstained. Holly looked back at his mother. "Can I ... can I talk to him?"

"You can try." She dried her cheeks, her tone weary. "He found out this morning that he wasn't allowed down there." She turned in his direction. "So he's watching it on TV."

Holly was heartbroken for him, but even so, she never expected the reaction she got that day. She went to him and sat beside him on the sofa. "Alex ..."

"I can't talk." He didn't look at her. "Sorry, Holly ... I have to watch this. I have to know." He stood and walked closer to the screen. "He's alive in there somewhere; I can feel it. They just need to get to him."

The pain in his voice frightened her, and she slid back deeper into the sofa. For two hours she stayed, wanting to help or hug him, trying to offer him some sort of comfort. But he was driven by the action on the screen, as if by watching carefully he could somehow will the rescue workers to find his father.

Alex stayed that way all day and for the next several days until the captains in charge of the rescue operation declared that the work had become a recovery. No one could possibly have survived the collapse of the towers and still be alive so many days later.

Again Holly went to him, but this time Alex met her at the door. "I can't talk." His eyes were dead, closed off in a way they'd never been to her. "My mom and I have a lot to work through, Holly. Try to understand."

She tried, and at first she figured he was in shock, the way most of the country and particularly the people of New York City were. But as the horrible days turned into weeks, his distance from her and indifference toward her remained.

Whereas before the attacks Alex had spent most of his free time with her, afterwards he wanted only to come home and study, or run at the track. He finished senior football season with his best numbers ever, but he seemed to find no joy in playing or in anything else.

“I’m worried about him,” his mother admitted at one of the home games when Holly sat beside her. “He told me he doesn’t believe in God anymore. Not if God could let all those firefighters die.”

The weeks became months. Over Christmas break, Alex talked to her just once. “I’ve been a jerk, Holly. I know it.” He looked at her, but not really. Not the way he used to. “It’s like I can’t feel anything anymore. Like I’m stuck or something.”

Holly remembered one time that spring when they happened to meet after school in the 400 Building. He saw her from the other side of the hallway. Of course, he saw her. But he barely looked at her, and he never even slowed as he approached her.

“Alex.” She called his name, and that was when he finally stopped and really noticed her.

“Hey ...”

Holly felt strangely awkward, the way she had never felt around Alex. “Wanna go get something to eat? We need to talk.”

His eyes never softened, never showed even a hint of emotion. “No, thanks. I have to get to work.” He started walking away from her. “See ya, Holly.”

So many times that year she had wanted to shake him, stop him in the school parking lot or in the cafeteria, and yell at him in front of the whole student body, if that’s what it took. Because Alex Brady wasn’t the only one suffering from the disaster of 9/11. At their school alone, nearly half the kids knew someone who died, someone who was hurt or grieving the loss of a loved one.

Support groups began meeting after school, and counselors were available for kids who couldn’t shake their sorrow. But Alex was different from any of those. As far as Holly knew, he never once went for counseling or met with one of the support groups. Whatever he was feeling, he never voiced his sorrow or grief. Instead, he simply let the Alex Brady he had once been die. At the graduation party when school ended, he pulled her aside and gave her

more of a window into his new life than he'd given her all year. "I'm moving," he told her. His look still wasn't the clear-eyed one she had known before, but his tone was kind. "I wanted you to hear it from me."

She asked him where he was going, and when he explained that he was headed out West to fight crime, she suddenly understood. His life, his heart, his days ... all of it had become taken up by one single focus — taking out the sort of criminal that had killed his father. A year later when she went to LA, she was sure he would've found his way past the hurt and anger. If he wasn't seeing anyone, she expected him to welcome her with open arms and apologize for how he'd acted. But not once since September 11 had she seen him look even remotely like the guy she used to love.

She had talked to his mother several times — mostly in the first few years after the terrorist attacks. "He's hurting, Holly. He won't deal with it, so the pain stays in his heart where it's killing him."

"Does he really think he'll find healing by seeking revenge?" Holly still loved him. She would've done anything to reach him, but she no longer knew how.

"It isn't revenge." Alex's mother sounded pensive. "He cares about the bad guys as much as the victims. Before he settled on law enforcement, he even thought about going into counseling. So he could help people change for the better — before they were capable of hurting society."

It was as if Alex was trying to become a real life Batman, a person incapable of sustaining relationships in his quest to right all the wrongs in the world. And for some sad reason — even though everyone who loved him could see the futility in his driving determination — Alex couldn't see it.

He still couldn't see it.



"Holly, you coming out?" Ron's voice rang out from the dining room on the other side of the house.

"Almost." She kept her tone upbeat because she needed this time, these few minutes. If for nothing more than to catch her breath.

She walked to the full-length window at the far end of her office and gripped the frame on either side. For just a few more minutes she wanted to live there again, in the past, back when she and Alex had all the world figured out, all eternity too. She could feel him beside her, hear the smooth richness of his voice as they walked along the path through Central Park on warm spring

evenings. She could smell his cologne, the way it came off better on him than in the bottle and how it mixed with the mint of his favorite gum.

“I think I found a favorite Bible verse ...” he had told her on one of those days. “*“For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength.”* That’s gotta be one of the best.”

Holly had heard it a hundred times before, but in that moment — with all the future stretched out before them — she might as well have been hearing it for the first time. After that, the verse belonged to both of them. Never mind the struggles that faced so many high school kids. They believed with God’s help the two of them could do all things, absolutely anything.

His faith had been unshakable back then, and hers too. She closed her eyes and tried to hold onto the memory, the way his hand felt around hers, the easy way their steps fell at the same time as they walked side by side. *Alex, what happened to us? How did we let it slip away?*

Ron was talking to the other guys, and his loud voice interrupted the moment. The answer was obvious, of course. They didn’t let it slip away. What they shared — the love and laughter, the quiet walks and determined faith — all of it came crashing down right alongside the glass and steel and bodies in the collapse of the Twin Towers. Alex had refused himself the joy of loving and living ever since then.

She heard Dave asking about her in the other room, and she blinked herself back into the present. Two years ago, seeing Alex’s picture in the paper might’ve prompted her to find him again, call him, and at least reminisce about the beautiful days they’d left behind. But the eyes in the picture on the front page confirmed what she had only guessed before today. That there was no point ever contacting Alex again for one simple reason:

The Alex Brady she had known and loved no longer existed.

Hoofstuk 5

Volgens Holly het die verandering in Alex ingetree die oomblik toe hy gehoor het dat die Twin Towers besig is om inmekaar te stort. Alex het oornag in ’n ander mens verander, asof ’n stukkjie van hom in die rommel van Ground Zero begrawe is.

Sy het die oggend van 12 September na sy huis toe gegaan, en sy ma het die deur oopgemaak. Hulle twee het mekaar omhels en gehuil, en gemompel dat Alex se pa dalk nog leef en enige oomblik gered gaan word. Eindelik het Holly ’n paar treë teruggetree en na die ander vertrek gekyk. Alex het op die

bank gesit en na die TV gestaar. Sy oë was rooi, sy wange nat van die tranes. Holly het weer na sy ma gekyk. “Kan ek ... kan ek met hom praat?”

“Jy kan probeer.” Sy het haar wange afgevee, haar stem was moeg. “Hy het vanoggend uitgevind dat hy nie daar toegelaat word nie.” Sy draai in sy rigting. “Daarom kyk hy daarna op die TV.”

Holly het hom só jammer gekry, maar sy het nooit die reaksie verwag wat sy daardie dag van hom gekry het nie. Sy het na hom toe geloop en langs hom op die bank gaan sit. “Alex ... ”

“Ek kan nie nou praat nie.” Hy het nie na haar gekyk nie. “Jammer, Holly ... Ek moet hierna kyk. Ek moet wéét.” Hy het opgestaan en nader aan die TV geloop. “Hy is lewend iewers daarbinne; ek kan dit voel. Hulle moet hom net kry.”

Die seer in sy stem het haar bang gemaak, en sy het teruggeleun teen die bank. Sy het twee uur lank daar gebly, om hom te help of vir hom ’n drukkie te gee, hom te probeer troos. Maar al wat vir hom saak gemaak het, was die aksie op die skerm, so asof hy die reddingswerkers kon aanspoor om sy pa te kry.

Alex het die hele dag asook die volgende paar dae voor die TV gebly totdat die kapteins in beheer van die reddingsoperasie aangekondig het dat daar met opruimingswerk begin gaan word. Niemand kon enigsins die ineenstorting van die torings oorleef het en soveel dae daarna steeds leef nie.

Weer het Holly na hom toe gegaan, maar hierdie keer het Alex haar by die deur ontvang. “Ek kan nie praat nie.” Sy oë was dood, afgesluit van haar soos nog nooit tevore nie. “Ek en my ma het baie dinge om te verwerk, Holly. Probeer verstaan.”

Sy het probeer. Eers het sy gedink hy ly aan skok soos die grootste deel van die land en spesifiek die mense van New York. Maar toe die aaklige dae weke word, het sy afstand en afsydigheid teenoor haar steeds gebly.

Voor die aanvalle het Alex die meeste van sy vrye tyd saam met haar deurgebring en sou hy ná die tyd huis toe gaan en leer, of gaan hardloop. Hy het die voetbalseisoen baie goed afgesluit, maar dit het nie gelyk of hy dít, of enigiets anders, geniet nie.

“Ek is bekommerd oor hom,” het sy ma erken by een van die tuiswedstryde waar Holly langs haar gesit het. “Hy het vir my gesê hy glo nie meer in God nie. Nie as Hy al daardie brandweermanne laat sterf het nie.”

Die weke het maande geword. Tydens die Kersvakansie het Alex net een keer met haar gepraat. “Ek was die afgelope tyd ’n slegte ou, Holly. Ek weet dit.” Hy het na haar gekyk, maar ook nie regtig nie. Nie soos hy altyd het nie. “Dit is asof ek niks meer kan voel nie. Asof ek dood is binne-in of iets.”

Holly onthou een keer daardie lente toe hulle mekaar toevallig by die skool raakgeloop het. Hy het haar van die een kant van die gang gesien. Natuurlik het hy haar gesien. Maar hy het skaars na haar gekyk, en hy het nie eers stadiger begin loop toe hy nadergekom het nie.

“Alex.” Sy het sy naam uitgeroep en dit was toe dat hy uiteindelik gaan staan

het en regtig na haar gekyk het.

“Haai ...”

Holly het ongemaklik gevoel, soos sy nooit in Alex se teenwoordigheid gevoel het nie. “Wil jy nie iets gaan eet nie? Ons moet praat.”

Sy oë het nie sagter geword of enige teken van emosie getoon nie. “Nee dankie. Ek moet gaan werk.” Hy het weggeleef. “Sien jou, Holly.”

So baie keer daardie jaar wou sy hom skud, hom voorkeer in die skool se parkeerarea of in die kafeteria, en, as dit sou help, voor almal op hom skree. Want Alex Brady was nie die enigste een wat swaargekry het as gevolg van die tragedie op 11 September nie. By hulle skool alleen het omtrent die helfte van die kinders iemand geken wat dood is, seergekry het of gerou het oor die dood van ’n geliefde.

Ondersteuningsgroepe het ná skool bymekaargekom en daar was beraders vir kinders wat nie hulle hartseer kon verwerk nie. Maar Alex was anders as die res. Sover Holly weet, was hy nie een keer vir berading of by een van die ondersteuningsgroepe nie. Wat dit ook al was wat hy gevoel het, hy het nooit oor sy hartseer gepraat nie. Hy het eerder die Alex Brady van vroeër laat wegsterf. By die partytjie aan die einde van hulle skoolloopbaan het hy haar eenkant toe geroep en haar meer van sy nuwe lewe vertel as wat hy die hele jaar gedoen het. “Ek gaan trek,” het hy gesê. Sy oë was steeds nie so helder soos voorheen nie, maar sy stemtoon was vriendelik. “Ek wou jou self vertel.” Sy het vir hom gevra waarheen hy op pad is, en toe hy verduidelik dat hy na die weste gaan verhuis om misdaad te bestry, het sy skielik verstaan. Sy lewe, sy hart, sy dae ... alles is opgeneem deur ’n enkele fokus – om die tipe kriminele te vang wat sy pa doodgemaak het. ’n Jaar later toe sy Los Angeles toe is, was sy seker dat hy die hartseer en woede sou verwerk het. As hy nie iemand anders ontmoet het nie, was sy seker hy sou haar met ope arms verwelkom en om verskoning vra vir hoe hy opgetree het. Maar sedert 11 September het sy nog nie een keer gesien dat hy lyk soos die man vir wie sy lief was nie.

Sy het ’n paar keer met sy ma gepraat – meestal gedurende die eerste paar jaar ná die terroriste-aanvalle. “Hy het seer, Holly. Hy het dit nog nie verwerk nie; daarom bly die pyn in sy hart, en dit is besig om hom dood te maak.”

“Dink hy regtig hy sal genesing vind deur wraak te neem?” Holly was steeds lief vir hom. Sy sou enigiets doen om uit te reik na hom, maar sy het nie meer geweet hoe nie.

“Dit is nie wraak nie.” Alex se ma het swaarmoedig geklink. “Hy gee om vir die slegte mense net soos vir die slagoffers. Voordat hy ’n polisieman geword het, het hy selfs daaraan gedink om ’n berader te word. Sodat hy mense kan help om ten goede te verander – voordat hulle die gemeenskap skade aandoen.”

Dit was asof Alex Batman probeer wees het, iemand wat nie sy verhoudings in stand kon hou nie as gevolg van sy strewe om al die slegte dinge in die wêreld reg te maak. En vir die een of ander hartseer rede, selfs al kon almal

wat hom liefhet sien sy vasberadenheid werp geen vrugte af nie, kon Alex dit nie sien nie.

Hy kan dit steeds nie sien nie.

✧

“Holly, is jy op pad?” Ron se stem kom uit die eetkamer aan die ander kant van die huis.

“Ek is amper daar!” sy hou haar stem lig, want sy het die tyd nodig, die paar minute. Al is dit net om weer rustig te word.

Sy loop na die groot venster aan die verste punt van haar kantoor en staan met haar hande aan weerskante van die vensterraam. Vir net ’n paar minute wil sy daar bly, in die verlede, toe sy en Alex gelukkig was en geweet het wat die toekoms vir hulle inhou. Sy kan hom langs haar voel, die rykheid van sy stem hoor terwyl hulle op ’n warm lenteaand al langs die paadjie in Central Park loop. Sy kan sy reukwater ruik, hoe dit lekkerder aan hom ruik as wanneer jy aan die botteltjie ruik en hoe dit meng met die kruisementgeur van sy gunsteling kougom.

“Ek dink ek het my gunsteling Bybelvers ontdek ... ” het hy tydens een van daardie dae vir haar gesê. “‘Ek is tot alles in staat deur Hom wat my krag gee.’ Dit moet een van die beste wees.”

Holly het dit al honderde kere van tevore gehoor, maar op daardie oomblik, met die toekoms wat voor hulle gelê het, was dit asof sy dit vir die eerste keer hoor. Daarna was dit hulle albei se gunsteling. Ongeag die baie struikelblokke wat soveel hoërskoolleerders in die gesig gestaar het. Hulle het geglo dat hulle twee met God se hulp alles kon doen, absoluut alles.

Sy geloof het toe rotsvas gestaan, hare ook. Sy maak haar oë toe en probeer die herinnering nog ’n oomblik vashou, hoe sy hand om hare gevoel het, hoe hulle dieselfde ritme in hulle stap gehad het terwyl hulle langs mekaar loop. *Alex, wat het met ons gebeur? Hoe kon ons dit sommer so tot niet laat gaan?*

Ron is besig om met die ander mans te praat en sy harde stem onderbreek die oomblik. Die antwoord is natuurlik vanselfsprekend. Hulle het dit nie tot niet laat gaan nie. Wat hulle gedeel het – die liefde en lag, die rustige tye waartydens hulle gaan stap het en die vasberade geloof – alles het saam met die glas en staal en liggame in die Twin Towers ineengestort. Alex het homself sedert daardie dag van die vreugde van liefhê en leef ontnem.

Sy hoor hoe Dave in die ander vertrek na haar vra. Sy knip haar oë en sy is terug in die hede. As sy Alex se foto twee jaar gelede in die koerant gesien het, sou dit haar dalk aangespoor het om hom op te soek, hom te bel en ten minste die herinneringe te deel oor die wonderlike dae wat hulle agtergelaat het. Maar die oë op die foto op die voorblad bevestig wat sy voor vandag maar net geraai het. Daar is geen punt daarin om Alex ooit weer te kontak nie om een eenvoudige rede: Die Alex Brady wat sy geken en liefgehad het, bestaan nie meer nie.

SIX

Alex liked driving the Los Angeles freeways, whatever the gas prices. He didn't spend money on much else, so he could afford to drive. Besides, he wouldn't have traded his truck for anything. He drove a black Dodge Ram mega cab with a HEMI V – 8 — the kind of ride any environmentalist would hate, not that Alex would do anything about that. The truck was perfect for him — enough height to see over the LA traffic, power to go off-roading after work, and plenty of room for Bo in the back.

Still, Alex never once drove the truck to headquarters in Monterey Park. The last thing he wanted was for the bad guys to mark his Dodge and make him a target in his off-hours. Everyone knew the K9 deputies were headquartered at Monterey Park. So he did what a lot of deputies did. He parked his squad car at the Lost Hills station, eight miles from his condo. Every day he and Bo would get in his Dodge and drive to Lost Hills, where Alex would change into his uniform and share a few words with the local guys. The added driving was a good thing, more time to think about the calls behind him, the day ahead.

From Lost Hills, he and Bo would take his specially outfitted K9 squad car into headquarters. There was another benefit. If he saw someone suspicious, he might find a stolen car or a person with a warrant. The freeways belonged to the Highway Patrol, but if he caught someone tailgating or speeding, weaving in and out of traffic, or driving with expired plates, and if Alex had a suspicious feeling about the driver, he could run the plates. If the check turned up any sort of warrant, he could make a stop. He would leave Bo in the backseat with the air conditioning on, and quickly get to the heart of the matter.

He was halfway to headquarters, merging onto I – 10 east when he spotted an older model Cadillac, deep orange and low to the ground. The car looked familiar. It took him a minute, but then he remembered. He'd seen it parked out front of an East LA drug bust a few weeks ago. Alex stayed with the car and after a quarter mile, he was convinced the driver was under the influence of something. He ran the plates and sure enough — the driver was wanted on a drug charge. He radioed in that he was pulling over a possible suspect and that he needed a CHP officer backup.

At first it looked like the driver of the Cadillac might gun it. But then the car swerved to the side of the road, and the driver slammed on his brakes. Alex pulled up behind him and left Bo in the car. The smell of alcohol hit him before he reached the guy's window. He was asking a few preliminary questions when, there on the floor, he saw a Ziploc bag of what looked like cocaine.

Alex radioed in the find, and in a few minutes two CHP cars pulled up behind his squad car. Half an hour later, the orange Cadillac had been impounded and the suspect was being hauled off — caught driving drunk and in possession of coke. Another drug dealer on his way to being locked up, and all before his shift even began.

It was the kind of morning that would've made Alex's father proud.

All told, Alex worked four overtime hours before his regular shift taking Bo through a couple of Compton area high schools and conducting three interviews at headquarters with TV reporters trying to learn more about the award he had earned. Alex didn't mind reporters. Any positive print was a good thing for K9 officers, helping the public understand the dogs and their high degree of training. More knowledge meant less fear and more public approval — all of which equated to the financial support the department needed to continue growing its K9 division.

His real shift started at four that afternoon, and for a while things picked up. A few drug arrests and a backup call on an unarmed suspect chase, one that ended with an arrest. But the late hours were unusually quiet. At midnight Alex checked out, and he and Bo headed back to the Lost Hills station.

Traffic was light, and after Alex made the transition north on the Ventura Freeway, he glanced over his shoulder. "You okay, Bo?"

The dog gave a single, sharp bark and moved about on his backseat.

"That's my dog. Good boy, Bo."

Alex kept his eyes on the surrounding lanes. No lawbreakers in this crowd, not that he could tell, anyway. He was sailing toward the San Fernando Valley when he clicked on his iPhone, glanced at the page of recent numbers, and felt the familiar thrill as he saw a missed call that read REA. He'd been waiting three days for this call.

He tapped the entry, and on the other end the phone began to ring. A quiet voice answered almost immediately. "Owl, here. Danny, this you?"

"The one and only." Alex rolled his window up tightly so he could hear every word. "Did you get the information?"

“I need a code, man. You know the routine.” The man spoke in fast, jerky sentences. As if someone was holding a gun to his head.

“Green Night.” Alex felt his body tense up. “Now tell me about the meeting.”

“It’s next week. Third Wednesday of August. The boss says we have to avoid headquarters for now. Thinks we’re being watched.” He laughed, but again it sounded strained, like he was high or something. “We’re looking hard at OCE, did I tell you that?”

“You did.” Alex swallowed, containing his fury, controlling it. “I’ve got the matches. Just tell me where and when.”

“Go to the meeting. Nine o’clock at Chumash Park. First picnic table off the parking lot.” He cleared his throat. “Gotta go.”

Alex wanted more. “You got other ideas, Owl, or just OCE?”

“Too many questions. Don’t miss the meeting.” There was a click and then silence.

He cursed under his breath and tapped the End Call bar. His communication with someone deep in the organization at the REA had started two weeks ago. On his day off, Alex had pulled an overtime shift at the men’s jail — something he was always looking for. The work gave Bo a day of downtime at home, and it helped Alex keep his ear to the ground. Pretty much the whole day was spent talking with other deputies, gleaning information about new gangs or wanted felons.

But that shift, Alex hung around a nineteen-year-old custody assistant, a skinny kid with dreams of being a deputy. The kid had a lot to say about one of his inmates — a guy who identified himself as a member of the REA. Apparently, the inmate had been talking, spilling his guts on everything the group was about. Alex wasn’t surprised. One of the commonalities of ecoterrorists was that they were openly unrepentant for their actions. The more militant members saw themselves as righteous soldiers in a cause to save the earth, and often they didn’t mind talking about their ideas.

“I listened.” The custody assistant lowered his voice. They were sitting at a desk, but he clearly didn’t want any of the inmates to hear him. “I think the con thought I was on his side, ready to sign up.”

“I have a feeling you won’t be a C.A. for long,” Alex’s heart beat faster. He hoped the compliment would make the kid talk. “So tell me about it ... what did the guy say?”

When the C.A. realized Alex’s interest in the inmate, the kid shared

everything he knew. Probably trying to impress Alex. When he left that day, Alex had a phone number and a code word — Green Night. He didn't expect much to come from the tip. He doubted it was even valid. But that afternoon he made the call and had his first brief conversation with Owl, as the REA guy called himself. After their second conversation, Alex was convinced the tip was legitimate. He told Owl his name was Danny, and he explained that he had a compelling desire to join REA. "I hate watching people rip through the world's resources like they're never going to run out," he told Owl.

Whatever else he said, Alex must've been convincing. Owl started talking, and before long he mentioned the Oak Canyon Estates. The information about the OCE had slipped, as far as Alex could tell. But it confirmed what Alex had feared all along.

The custom home development was next on the list for the environmental terrorists. Alex set his phone down on the console and stared at the empty stretch of freeway ahead of him. He reached back and scratched Bo's ear. "We're gonna get 'em, right, Bo?"

The dog whined his approval and nuzzled Alex's hand.

"You tell 'em. No one sets a fire on our shift." Alex sped up.

Environmental terrorists were not your typical street thugs, and they defied the definition of any other gang. They were educated and articulate, with an average income close to six figures. REA members didn't wear turbans or bandanas or heavy chains. They didn't shave their heads or tattoo their gang insignia on their arms. Instead, they drove hybrid or electric cars, rode their bikes to work, and kept mulch piles in their backyards. They shopped at Whole Foods, recycled everything from cereal boxes to plastic wrap, and wouldn't touch an apple unless it was organic. By day they held jobs at banks and advertising firms, tech corporations and telecommunication companies.

In other words, in a city like Los Angeles, they were absolutely mainstream, their agendas invisible and insidious. Most of them had started out as environmentalists, honorable people intent on being responsible and teaching responsibility in regards to the world's resources. Something everyone should be mindful of. But the members of the REA had allowed their devotion to the planet to become an obsession. A sick obsession.

Alex tried to picture the group meeting in clandestine locations, plotting the destruction of millions of dollars of other people's property and possessions. Not even concerned for the human life that might get in the way. He felt the familiar pain, the fact that he'd been unable to stop the al Qaeda terrorists from killing his father. But he could stop these terrorists. His father's memory was worth that much.

That anyone could be so crazed as to think that torching SUV's and burning down custom homes could ever help the environment. The idea was ludicrous. Alex tried to imagine what would happen if the members of the REA waited until a stiff Santa Ana wind and then set fire to a development like the one at Oak Canyon Estates. The mountains surrounding Las Virgenes Canyon would explode into flames, and, yes, lives could be lost.

Firefighters and civilians. Alex shuddered to think just how many.

Once he was in his own truck, he didn't head south the way he would've if he were going home. Instead, he took the freeway a couple exits the other direction and turned off at Lindero Canyon Road. He knew where the REA headquarters were, another tip from the custody assistant. Alex had been up here three times already, and again the tip checked out. The house was definitely a meeting place for the group.

Of course, Alex had tried to pass the information along to his sergeant, but the man wasn't interested. "We can only apply the law where people have broken it, Brady," the man told him. He was older and strictly by the book. "There's plenty of law breakers out there to keep you busy."

That's why Alex had tried to explain the information to Clay and Joe at dinner last weekend. Clay was overseeing the department's efforts against the REA, and Alex had a feeling Clay already knew the whereabouts of the group's headquarters.

But then why weren't they working harder to find enough evidence to make the arrests?

Alex had seen Clay and Joe in the break room at the Monterey Park headquarters every day since their barbecue last weekend, but the couple times he'd tried to bring up the REA, he'd been shot down.

"Don't get hung up on this thing," Clay finally told him.

"Do we have to wait for a fire?" Alex had to control his tone. "Is that what this is about?"

"You know the drill, Brady. We have to wait for a threat, at least. Like I said, they're on our radar."

Alex's patience on the matter was wearing thin.

He worked his truck up Lindero to the place where it veered to the right. The house he'd been watching was at the top of a winding gravel road, well into the brittle brush and dry grass that made up the Southern California hillsides. This was Alex's fourth visit up here, and each time he wondered why a group

of fire starters would make their headquarters in a house that stood right in the path of fire danger.

Maybe the REA didn't care if their headquarters burned down. Less evidence that way. Alex felt his determination double. There weren't enough days in a lifetime to round up all the terrorists who would ever threaten the United States, but Alex would spend his life locking up the ones he could. And that included the members of the REA. He turned off his lights, same as last week, and took his truck off-road to a spot behind a covering of ten-foot-high wild shrubs. The kind of ground cover that made this fire season so volatile.

From behind the brush, he could still see through a small clearing. He angled himself so he could scratch Bo's ears with one hand while he held the pair of high-powered binoculars in the other. His heart reacted to what he was looking at. They were meeting tonight, same as last week. Wednesday night, well after midnight. Last week Alex happened to call at this time and hear voices in the background. Instinct told him he'd hit upon the group's secret meeting time, and sure enough, here they were.

He scanned the bumpers of the seven cars parked in front of the house. All of them had removed their license plates for the gathering — same as last week. Alex figured they probably stopped at separate spots on their way up, removed their plates, and didn't put them on again until they were headed back down the hill. He leaned against the headrest. This was a smart group, no question. They left no trail, donned none of the usual environmental bumper stickers. They were middle- and upper-class crazies who masqueraded as businessmen by day, terrorists by night.

He pulled out his phone again and clicked his way to the section of YouTube clips stored there. He'd bookmarked a dozen news videos about last year's brush fires later deemed to have been deliberately set, and now he called up one of the worst — a canyon fire started last year at a development in San Diego. Alex turned the volume down so Bo wouldn't wake up, and he let the clip play.

"Police believe the environmental terrorist group REA is responsible for the loss late last night of four model homes at a north San Diego hillside development," the announcer stated. The visual switched from the reporter to a wall of flames tearing through a series of homes. "Thankfully, the homes were empty at the time of the attack. A white flag was left in the front yard of one of the homes with spray-painted green letters that read REA." The shot switched to the jagged edges of a homemade flag fluttering in front of a raging inferno. The camera view changed again, and the screen showed four fire trucks on a dirt road with flames ten stories high on either side. "Firefighters narrowly escaped being caught in the ensuing brush fire," the announcer

continued. Alex slid his finger across the video's progress line and watched that part again, and then a third time.

That must've been what it was like for his dad and the other emergency workers, trying to rescue people forty, sixty, eighty floors up in a building exploding with flames. He lifted his binoculars and stared at the tops of the few heads he could make out. If he'd had this type of bead on the al Qaeda terrorists before September 11, he would've called for the entire department to back him up, and together they would've brought down the group before a single plane could be hijacked. He felt the satisfaction of the imaginary scenario.

But then, before 9/11 he wouldn't have had any idea the destruction that could come from a meeting like the one taking place in the house up the hill. Life was one carefree day after another, and never for a single minute did he or anyone else think a morning would come when more than four hundred firefighters and police would go to work and never come home again.

He clicked off his phone and crossed his arms, holding down the memories fighting their way to the surface. When he could no longer keep them at bay, he stopped trying and let them come — wholly and completely, like ghosts from the past. On a night like this, the memories reminded him why he was fighting this war in the first place. But remembering, for Alex, wasn't something warm and comforting the way it was for some people.

It was a pain almost more than he could bear.

Hoofstuk 6

Alex hou daarvan om sommer net op Los Angeles se deurpaaie rond te ry, ongeag die brandstofprys. Hy bestee nie eintlik geld aan enigiets anders nie; daarom kan hy dit bekostig om rond te ry. Hy sal in elk geval nie sy bakkie vir enigiets verruil nie. Hy ry 'n groot bakkie met 'n V8-enjin, die soort bakkie wat enige omgewingsbewuste sal haat. Maar dit pla hom nie. Die bakkie is perfek vir hom. Dit is hoog genoeg om oor die verkeer in Los Angeles uit te kyk, dit het krag om ná werk op grondpaaie rond te jaag, en dit het genoeg ruimte agterin vir Bo.

Tog ry Alex nie met die bakkie na die hoofkantoor in Monterey Park nie. Die laaste ding wat hy wil hê, is dat kriminele sy bakkie opmerk en hy 'n teiken word wanneer hy nie werk nie. Almal weet die polisiemanne van die honde-eenheid is by Monterey Park gestasioneer. Daarom maak hy soos baie polisiemanne maak. Hy laat staan sy polisiemotor by die polisiestasie in Lost Hills, dertien kilometer van sy huis af. Hy en Bo klim dan elke dag in sy bakkie en ry na Lost Hills toe. Daar trek Alex sy uniform aan en knoop gou 'n

geselsie aan met die manne. Die ekstra ryery is 'n goeie ding, want dit gee hom meer tyd om na te dink oor wat die dag vir hom inhou.

Vanaf Lost Hills ry hy en Bo dan met sy polisiemotor, spesiaal aangepas vir honde, na die hoofkantoor. Dit hou nog 'n voordeel in. As hy iemand verdag sien, is die kans goed dat hy dalk 'n gesteelde motor of 'n persoon met 'n lasbrief vind. Die deurpaaie behoort aan die verkeerspolisie, maar as iemand die spoedgrens oorskry, deur die verkeer vleg of met nommerplate ry waarvan die lisensie verstryk het, of as Alex agterdogtig is oor 'n motorbestuurder, kan hy inligting omtrent die motor en sy bestuurder nagaan. Indien daar 'n grondige rede is, kan hy die motor aftrek. Hy los Bo dan agter in die bakkie met die lugversorger aan en sorteer gou die sakie uit.

Hy is al halfpad op pad na die hoofkantoor toe hy 'n ouerige Cadillac sien, 'n oranje een wat laag op die grond is. Die motor lyk bekend. Dit neem hom 'n rukkie, maar dan onthou hy. Hy het dit geparkeer gesien staan by die plek waar hulle 'n paar weke gelede dwelms gekry het. Alex ry agter die motor aan en ná vyfhonderd meter is hy oortuig daarvan dat die bestuurder onder die invloed van iets is. Hy doen navraag oor die nommerplaat en toe is hy seker – die bestuurder word gesoek op aanklag van die besit van dwelms. Hy laat weet oor die tweerigtingradio dat hy 'n moontlike verdagte gaan aftrek en dat hy die ondersteuning van die verkeerspolisie nodig het.

Eers lyk dit of die bestuurder dalk gaan wegjaag. Maar dan swaai die motor na die kant van die pad en die bestuurder trap rem. Alex stop agter hom en los Bo in die motor. Die reuk van alkohol tref hom nog voordat hy by die motor se ruit kom. Terwyl hy 'n paar voorlopige vrae vra, sien hy daar lê 'n sakkie in die motor met wat lyk soos kokaïen.

Alex laat weet oor die tweerigtingradio dat hy dwelms by die man gevind het en binne 'n paar minute stop twee motors van die verkeerspolisie agter sy polisiemotor. 'n Halfuur later word daar beslag gelê op die oranje Cadillac en die verdagte word in hegtenis geneem – gevang op aanklag van dronkbestuur en die besit van kokaïen. Nog 'n dwelmhandelaar op pad om toegesluit te word en dit nog voor sy skof begin het.

Dit is die tipe oggend wat Alex se pa trots sou maak.

Om die waarheid te sê, Alex werk vier uur oortyd voor sy gewone skof begin. Hy neem Bo deur 'n paar hoërskole in die Compton-area en daar word drie onderhoude by die hoofkantoor met hom gevoer deur TV-verslaggewers wat meer probeer uitvind oor die toekenning wat hy ontvang het. Die verslaggewers pla Alex glad nie. Enige positiewe berigte is 'n goeie ding vir die polisiemanne van die honde-eenheid en help die publiek om die honde en hulle hoë standaard van opleiding te verstaan. Meer kennis beteken minder vrees en meer openbare aanvaarding – en dit dra alles by tot die finansiële ondersteuning wat die honde-eenheid nodig het om te groei.

Sy werklike skof begin teen vieruur die middag en vir 'n rukkie is hy baie besig. Daar word 'n paar mense in hegtenis geneem vir dwelms en hy word uitgeroep om 'n gewapende verdagte agterna te sit, 'n jaagtog wat eindig in

die inhegtenisname van die persoon. Maar later die aand is dit ongewoon stil. Alex se skof eindig teen middernag, en dan is hy en Bo op pad na die Lost Hills-polisiestasie.

Die verkeer is stil en toe hy noord draai, kyk hy oor sy skouer. “Is jy oukei, Bo?”

Die hond gee ’n skerp blaf en beweeg op die agterste sitplek.

“Oubaas se hond. Mooi so, Bo.”

Alex hou sy oë op die bane langs hom. Geen kriminele in hierdie groep mense nie, in elk geval nie sover hy kan sien nie. Terwyl hy in die rigting van die San Fernando-vallei ry, skakel hy sy selfoon aan en kyk na die nommers van mense wat hom onlangs geskakel het. Hy voel die bekende opgewondenheid toe hy ’n oproep sien wat hy gemis het: die ROA. Hy wag nou al drie dae vir hierdie oproep.

Hy skakel die nommer en die telefoon begin lui. ’n Stil stem antwoord byna onmiddellik. “Uil, hier. Danny, is dit jy?”

“Ja, dis ek.” Alex draai sy venster op sodat hy elke woord kan hoor. “Het julle die inligting gekry?”

“Ek moet eers die kode kry, man. Jy weet hoe dit werk.” Die man praat vinnig, in hortende sinne. Asof iemand ’n geweer teen sy kop hou.

“Groen Nag.” Alex voel hoe sy lyf gespanne raak. “Vertel my nou wanneer ontmoet ons.”

“Volgende week. Die derde Woensdag in Augustus. Die baas sê ons moet vir eers wegbly van die hoofkwartier af. Hy dink ons word dopgehou.” Hy lag, maar weer klink dit gespanne, asof hy onder die invloed is of iets. “Het ek jou gesê ons oorweeg Oak Canyon Estates ten sterkste?”

“Ja, jy het.” Alex sluk, onderdruk sy woede, probeer dit beheer. “Ek het reeds die vuurhoutjies. Sê net vir my waar en wanneer.”

“Gaan na die vergadering toe. Nege-uur by Chumash Park. Die eerste piekniektafeltjie langs die parkeerarea.” Hy maak keelskoon. “Ek moet gaan.” Alex wil meer inligting hê. “Uil, het julle ander plekke in gedagte of net Oak Canyon Estates?”

“Jy vra te veel vrae. Moenie die vergadering mis nie.” En skielik is dit stil aan die ander kant.

Hy vloek stilweg en beëindig die oproep. Sy kommunikasie met iemand hoog op in die ROA het twee weke gelede begin. Op sy dag af het Alex oortyd gewerk by die manstronk – iets wat hy baie geniet om te doen. Die werk gee Bo ’n rustige dag tuis en dit help Alex om sy oor op die grond te hou. Hy het byna die hele dag met ander polisiemanne gepraat om inligting te versamel oor nuwe bendes of skurke wat gesoek word.

Maar tydens daardie skof het Alex sy tyd deurgebring saam met ’n negentienjarige wat gevang is en nou as informant optree, ’n maer jong man met die droom om polisieman te word. Hy het baie te sê gehad oor een van sy medegevangenes – ’n man wat homself geïdentifiseer het as lid van die ROA. Hierdie tronkvoël het klaarblyklik vertel van alles wat die groep beplan. Dit

was vir Alex geen verrassing nie. Iets wat algemeen voorkom onder eko-terroriste is dat hulle openlik en sonder berou oor hulle aksies praat. Die meer militante lede sien hulleself as soldate wat regverdig optree in 'n poging om die aarde te red, en hulle gee dikwels nie om om oor hulle idees te praat nie.

“Ek het geluister.” Die informant het sagter gepraat. Hulle het by 'n tafel gesit en hy wou vir seker nie hê een van die gevangenes moes hom hoor nie. “Ek dink die man het gedink ek is aan sy kant, gereed om by sy groep aan te sluit.” “Ek is seker jy gaan nie meer lank net 'n informant wees nie,” Alex se hart het vinniger geklop. Hy het gehoop dat 'n kompliment die kind sal laat praat. “So vertel my daarvan ... wat het die man gesê?”

Toe die jong man besef dat Alex in die tronkvoël belangstel, het hy alles wat hy geweet het, vertel. Hy het heel waarskynlik probeer om vir Alex te beïndruk. Toe hy daardie dag huis toe gegaan het, het Alex 'n telefoonnommer asook 'n kodewoord gehad – Groen Nag. Hy het nie gedink die leidraad sal tot iets lei nie. Hy het getwyfel of dit enigsins waar is. Maar daardie middag het hy die nommer geskakel en sy eerste kort gesprek met Uil gehad, soos die lid van die ROA homself genoem het. Ná hulle tweede gesprek was Alex oortuig daarvan dat dit 'n goeie leidraad is. Hy het vir Uil gesê sy naam is Danny, en vir hom verduidelik dat hy 'n dringende begeerte het om by die ROA aan te sluit. “Ek haat dit om te sien hoe mense die wêreld se hulpbronne vermors asof dit nooit gaan opraak nie,” het hy vir Uil gesê.

Maak nie saak wat hy nog kwyt geraak het nie, Alex was seker oortuigend genoeg. Uil het begin praat en kort voor lank het hy Oak Canyon Estates genoem. Sover Alex kon agterkom, het die inligting oor die ontwikkeling per ongeluk uitgeglip. Maar dit het bevestig wat Alex nog die hele tyd gevrees het.

Dié ontwikkeling is volgende op die omgewingsterroriste se lys. Alex sit sy selfoon op die steunstuk voor hom neer en staar na die stil deurpad voor hom. Hy leun terug en krap Bo se oor. “Ons gaan hulle vang, nè, Bo?”

Die hond huil ter bevestiging en lek Alex se hand.

“Sê vir hulle. Niemand stig 'n brand wanneer ons aan diens is nie.” Alex ry vinniger.

Omgewingsterroriste is nie jou alledaagse skurke nie, en hulle is nie soos enige ander bende nie. Net spesifieke mense is deel van hierdie groep; geleerde mense met 'n gemiddelde inkomste van miljoene dollars. ROA-lede dra nie tulbande, bandanas of swaar kettings nie. Hulle skeer nie hulle koppe kaal of tatoeër hulle bende se ordetekens op hul arms nie. Hulle ry eerder hibriede of elektroniese motors, ry fiets werk toe en het 'n komposhoop in hulle agterplaas. Hulle koop net organiese kos en herwin alles, van graankoshouers tot plastiekomhulsels en sal nie aan 'n appel raak, tensy dit organies is nie. Hulle werk by banke, advertensiefirmas, tegniese besighede en telekommunikasiemaatskappye.

Met ander woorde, in 'n stad soos Los Angeles is hulle deel van die hoofstroom, hulle agenda onsigbaar en verraderlik. Die meeste van hulle was

eers omgewingsbewaarders. Eerbare mense wat daarop ingestel was om verantwoordelik op te tree en ander te leer hoe om verantwoordelik te wees wanneer dit by die aarde se hulpbronne kom. Iets waaraan almal aandag moet skenk. Maar die lede van die ROA het toegelaat dat hulle toewyding aan die planeet 'n obsessie word. 'n Siek obsessie.

Alex probeer hom voorstel hoe die groep in die geheim bymekaarkom om te beplan hoe hulle ander mense se eiendom en besittings van miljoene dollars gaan vernietig. Sonder om hulle te bekommer oor die lewens wat in die slag kan bly. Hy voel die bekende pyn, die feit dat hy nie die Al Qaeda-terroriste kon keer om sy pa dood te maak nie. Maar hy kan hierdie terroriste keer. Vir sy pa se onthalwe.

Dat enigeen so mal kan wees om te dink dat om motors aan die brand te steek en huise af te brand enigszins die omgewing kan help. Die idee is belaglik. Alex probeer hom voorstel wat sal gebeur as die ROA-lede wag totdat die sterk Santa Ana-wind opkom en dan 'n brand stig by 'n ontwikkeling soos die een by Oak Canyon Estates. Die berge rondom Las Virgenes-canyon sal in vlamme opgaan en, ja, lewens kan in die slag bly.

Brandweermanne en burgers. Alex sidder om te dink hoeveel lewens vernietig kan word.

Toe hy in sy bakkie klim, ry hy nie suid in die rigting van sy huis nie. 'n Paar afritte verder klim hy op die deurpad in die teenoorgestelde rigting en draai af op Lindero Canyon-weg. Hy weet waar die ROA se hoofkwartiere is; nog 'n leidraad wat hy by die informant gekry het. Alex was al drie keer hier, en weereens was die leidraad in die kol. Die huis was definitief 'n ontmoetingsplek vir die groep.

Natuurlik het Alex probeer om die inligting aan sy sersant deur te gee, maar die man het nie daarin belanggestel nie. "Ons kan slegs die wet toepas waar mense dit nie nakom nie, Brady," het die man vir hom gesê. Hy is ouer en tree streng volgens die reëls op. "Daar is baie oortreders daarbuite wat jou kan besig hou."

Dit is hoekom Alex verlede naweek tydens aandete die inligting aan Clay en Joe probeer verduidelik het. Clay is in beheer van die polisie se optrede teenoor die ROA, en Alex dink Clay weet alreeds waar die groep se hoofkwartiere is.

Maar hoekom werk hulle dan nie harder om genoeg bewyse te kry om mense in hegtenis te neem nie?

Alex het sedert die braai verlede naweek, elke dag vir Clay en Joe in die teekamer by die hoofkantoor in Monterey Park gesien, maar die paar keer wat hy oor die ROA begin praat het, het hulle die onderwerp vermy.

"Moenie dat hierdie ding jou so opvreet nie," het Clay uiteindelik vir hom gesê.

"Moet ons dan wag vir 'n brand?" Alex moes sy humeur betuel. "Is dit waaroor dit gaan?"

"Jy weet hoe dit werk, Brady. Ons moet ten minste vir 'n dreigement wag.

Soos ek gesê het, ons hou hulle dop.”

Alex se geduld raak nou min wanneer dit by hierdie saak kom.

Hy ry met Lindero langs na die plek waar die pad na regs draai. Die huis wat hy dophou, is aan die einde van ’n grondpad wat teen die heuwel uit kronkel, diep in die krakerige bosse en droë gras wat teen die heuwels in die suide van Kalifornië groei. Dit is die vierde keer dat Alex hierlangs ry, en elke keer wonder hy hoekom ’n groep brandstigters ’n huis wat uitgelewer is aan vuur hulle hoofkwartier sal maak.

Miskien gee die ROA nie om as hulle hoofkwartier afbrand nie. Dan is daar minder bewyse. Alex voel hoe sy vasberadenheid toeneem. Daar is nie genoeg dae in ’n leeftyd om al die terroriste te vang wat die Verenigde State bedreig nie, maar Alex sal sy lewe daaraan wy om dié wat hy kan toe te sluit. En dit sluit die lede van die ROA in. Hy skakel sy ligte af, net soos verlede week, en ry met sy bakkie in die bosse in na ’n plek agter hoë struik. Dit is die tipe plantegroei wat hierdie vuurseisoen so gevaarlik maak.

Van agter die struik kan hy steeds deur ’n klein openinkie sien. Hy skuif so dat hy Bo se ore met die een hand kan krap terwyl die ander ’n verkyker vashou. Sy hart klop in sy keel toe hy dit sien. Hulle ontmoet weer vanaand, net soos verlede week. Woensdagaand, ná middernag. Verlede week het Alex toevallig om twaalfuur gebel en stemme in die agtergrond gehoor. Sy instink het vir hom gesê dat hy die groep se geheime ontmoetingstyd ontrafel het, en sowaar, hier is hulle nou.

Hy kyk na die agterkante van die sewe motors wat voor die huis geparkeer staan. Almal het hulle nommerplate afgehaal vir die ontmoeting – net soos verlede week. Alex reken hulle stop waarskynlik by verskillende plekke op pad hierheen, haal die nommerplate af, en sit dit nie weer op totdat hulle met die heuwel af ry nie. Hy leun met sy kop teen die kopstut. Hierdie groep is sonder twyfel baie slim. Hulle laat geen leidrade nie, plak ook nie die gewone bufferplakkers oor omgewingsbewaring op hulle motors nie. Hulle is mense wat nie al hul varkies op hok het nie, uit die middelklas en hoër stand, doen hulle in die dag voor as sakemanne en dan is hulle terroriste in die nag.

Hy haal sy selfoon uit en klik op die ikon waar YouTube-uittreksels gestoor is. Hy het ’n dosyn nuusvideo’s oor verlede jaar se veldbrande gestoor wat later gereken is as brandstigting, en nou laat speel hy een van die ergstes – ’n brand in ’n canyon wat verlede jaar begin is by ’n ontwikkeling in San Diego. Alex draai die klank sagter sodat Bo nie wakker word nie, en speel die video-uittreksel.

“Die polisie is van mening dat omgewingsterroriste, die ROA, verantwoordelik is vir die verlies wat laat verlede nag gely is toe vier huise by ’n ontwikkeling in die heuwels in die noorde van San Diego afgebrand het,” klink ’n stem op. Die kamera verskuif van die verslaggewer na ’n muur van vlamme wat aan ’n klomp huise lek. “Gelukkig was die huise leeg tydens die aanval. ’n Wit vlag met die letters ROA in groen spuitverf daarop aangebring, is voor in die tuin van een van die huise geplant.” Op die skerm verskyn die

verweerde punte van 'n selfgemaakte vlag wat voor die vretende vlamme wapper. Die beeld op die skerm verander weer en dit wys vier brandweerwaens op 'n grondpad met vlamme aan albei kante wat hoog in die lug in lek. “Brandweermanne het die veldbrand ternouernood ontsnap,” vervolg die verslaggewer. Alex se vinger gly oor die knoppie en speel weer dié stukkies van die video, en dan nog 'n keer.

Dit is seker hoe dit vir sy pa en die ander reddingswerkers gevoel het toe hulle mense veertig, sestig, tagtig vloere hoog op probeer red het in 'n gebou wat deur vlamme verteer is. Hy tel sy verkyker op en staar na die bokant van die paar koppe wat hy kan uitmaak. As hy voor 11 September hierdie tipe inligting oor die Al Qaeda-terroriste gehad het, sou hy die hele polisiemag ingeroep het om hom te help, en saam sou hulle die groep gevange geneem het voordat een vliegtuig gekaap kon word. Hy voel die tevredenheid oor hom spoel terwyl hy hom die scenario voorstel.

Maar voor 11 September het hy geen idee gehad van die vernietiging wat kan voortspruit uit 'n ontmoeting soos die een wat voor hom in die huis op die heuwel plaasvind nie. Die lewe het uit die een sorgelose dag na die ander bestaan, en nie hy of enigiemand anders het vir 'n oomblik gedink die dag sou aanbreek waar meer as vierhonderd brandweer- en polisiemanne werk toe sou gaan en nooit weer terugkom nie.

Hy skakel sy selfoon af en vou sy arms oor sy bors, onderdruk die herinneringe wat hulle weg na die oppervlak veg. Toe hy nie langer kan nie, laat hy toe dat die herinneringe oor hom spoel – soos spoke uit die verlede. Op 'n aand soos vanaand herinner dit hom aan hoekom hy in die eerste plek hierdie oorlog voer. Maar om te onthou is nie vir Alex iets warm en vertroostend soos vir party ander mense nie.

Dit is vol pyn. Iets wat amper te veel is om te hanteer.

SEVEN

There was a place deep in the stony heart of Alex Brady where it would always be September 10, always that day before his dad left for work and never came back. Alex didn't go there often, but when the memories rushed at him the way they did now, he had no choice.

Holly Brooks lived down the street from him, and back in their elementary school days she was the yucky girl who tried to include herself with his group of friends on the way to class each morning. Alex would never forget the day that changed. He came in from a middle school football scrimmage, and Holly and her older sister were sitting at the kitchen table with Alex's mother.

"How was practice?" His mom stood and poured him a glass of milk.

Alex stood there — his helmet in one hand, shoulder pads in the other. He wasn't quite sure what he was feeling, except that his legs no longer felt attached to the rest of his body, and he couldn't force himself to look anywhere but at Holly. When had she grown up? And how had her hair gotten so long?

His mother seemed to notice he wasn't acting himself, so she laughed a sort of chuckle intended to put everyone at ease. "Holly and Heather were locked out of their house. Their mother had a doctor's appointment and forgot to leave the key."

Holly smiled at him. "Your mom said we could stay here." Her voice was soft and melodious, and in that single moment Alex felt his world slide off its axis. He nodded at her, downed his milk, and headed for the shower.

Things didn't change right away. But after that he would catch himself walking a longer path to get from one class to another just so he could say hi. By the time they were freshmen in high school, Holly was walking home with him every day. Her mom had a full-time career that fall and her older sister had a job after school, so Holly had nowhere to go but Alex's house.

That was the year when everyone else knew what neither of them was ready to admit. They were crazy about each other. Sometime that winter, Holly went

to church with Alex's family for the first time, and that led to an all-night phone conversation that kept the two of them awake in their own beds, whispering to each other until the sun came up.

"So, what your pastor said about God being your friend? You really believe that?" Holly whispered.

"Of course." He stifled a laugh so his parents wouldn't hear him. "You can talk to Him anytime. Just like you talk to me."

The memories grated against his soul like splintered wood. Alex stretched his legs to the passenger side of his squad car. The irony of the long-ago conversation with Holly made him certain he'd never forget it. He hadn't talked to God since the September morning when rescue workers gave up the search for survivors. But before then, nothing could've rattled his faith. It was as rocksolid as the Twin Towers themselves.

Holly had questioned him some more, asked him about the Bible and how he could know without a doubt that what he was reading was true. It wasn't that Holly didn't believe in God. Her parents took the family to church on Christmas and Easter, and somewhere in the house there was a dusty old Bible handed down from Holly's great-grandfather. They believed like lots of people believed. That working in the background was a God who created everything. But believing never got more personal than that. Being with Alex, being his friend their freshman year, changed everything for both of them. Especially the way Holly thought about God.

That summer, the two of them went to a Young Life camp, and they grew even more serious about their beliefs. Late one night when campers were supposed to be in and cabin doors locked until morning, Alex met her out by the massive maple tree near the back of the camp. The night was warm, and frogs carried on a noisy battle in the distance as they sat side-by-side staring at the stars and holding hands.

"Someday we'll fly to a foreign country a million miles away and be missionaries. So we can share everything we're learning about God," Holly's eyes sparkled in the moonlight.

"Let's make it a country with a beach and warm water." They both laughed, and the air around them remained innocent. There was no kissing then and not for the next few months. Not until his family had a New Year's Eve party their sophomore year, and Alex found Holly looking at pictures in his family's living room.

"There you are." He brought her a glass of sparkling cider. "Come on, everyone's playing charades." He took a step toward the doorway. "You have

to see my dad act out a chicken crossing the road. He's hilarious."

But she carefully picked up a framed photo of Alex's parents, arms around each other, laughing in some moment that belonged only to the two of them. "This is real, isn't it? The way they love each other?"

Her question caught him off guard. He looked from her to the photo and back again, confused. "Of course it's real." Only then did it hit him, the reason she was asking, the reason she never invited him to her house, but rather spent all her free time here. He closed the distance between them. "Your parents ... aren't like that?"

"No." Her smile was overtaken by the sadness in her eyes. She stared at the picture again. "Never." She hesitated, as if she wasn't sure how much to say. "They fight all the time, and my mom ... drinks a lot." She put the photo back on the shelf and turned to Alex. "It's nothing major, I guess. Just ..." she looked past him to the laughter in the next room. "... not like your parents."

Alex tried to think of something to say, some way he could fix the situation for her. Maybe if her parents talked to his, or if their two families started going to church together. He opened his mouth to tell her what he was feeling, but before he could say anything, the moment passed. Her sorrow lifted and she took his hand. "Let's go see your dad be a chicken."

They were hurrying from the room when they spotted a piece of mistletoe hanging from the doorframe overhead. Alex was never sure who stopped first, but suddenly there they were, standing under the mistletoe, giving each other a look that was half teasing, half scared to death. Alex made the first move. He put his hand on the side of her face and tenderly touched his lips to hers. Neither of them knew the first thing about kissing, so the moment was over as soon as it began.

But as they headed back to the living room, as they sat together on the sofa and watched his dad strut around the room making chicken noises, they shared a secret that belonged to them alone.

He tried to release the memory, but he wasn't completely successful. Behind his seat, Bo stretched and did a noisy yawn, and Alex turned to his K9 partner. He was moving his paws in his sleep — something he did often, especially on days when he hadn't gotten enough running, or when he was anxious for some work on the job. "I'm with you, Bo ..." he looked back at the house where the REA members were still gathered. "I'd love a little action right now."

But the men didn't seem to be leaving anytime soon, and the memories fighting for his attention weren't either. He leaned forward and rested his arms on the steering wheel. Things between him and Holly never really tipped into

the physically complicated territory most kids found themselves in. The two of them hardly ever kissed, and when they did their kisses were quick, more like an act of friendship. Almost as if they knew from the beginning they couldn't have it both ways. They could choose a sweet love rooted in faith, or the steamy backseat affair their friends were all about. The former gave them a friendship much stronger than the transient relationships of their peers, and by the time they reached the summer before their senior year, the summer of 2001, Alex and Holly were inseparable.

By then her parents must've seen what Alex's family shared, or the fact that their youngest daughter preferred being at the house down the street rather than at home. Whatever it was, Holly's parents began coming to church each week with Alex's parents, and Holly's mother stopped drinking. The two families were together often.

Alex closed his eyes and whispered her name, the way he hadn't said it in years. "Holly, girl ... I hope you found someone better than me ..."

Suddenly, there he was in the Adirondacks hiking the trail around Elk Lake with his parents and Holly and her family. The July humidity hadn't been as bad as back on Staten Island, and the forecast of thunderstorms never materialized. It was the third Saturday of the month, and Alex had that wonderful feeling summer would go on forever.

The parents were up ahead on the trail, and Holly's sister was with them. Alex slipped his fingers through Holly's and slowed his pace. "So ... seniors this year."

"Shhh." She giggled at him, her blue eyes dancing. "That's against the rules, silly."

"What rules?" He loved this about her, the way she kept their relationship fun and full of laughter.

"You can't talk about school when we're right in the middle of summer. Otherwise it'll disappear ..." she pulled away from him, her eyes bright with teasing, "like this!" She darted down a tree-covered hillside off the main trail, daring him to follow her.

"Hey!" He ran after her, but with so many trees he lost her almost right away. He was about to call her name when she jumped out at him from behind a huge trunk and grabbed his waist.

"Gotcha!" Her giggle was quiet, muffled by the canopy of branches and trees. She shifted herself so she was in front of him, then put her finger to his lips. "No more talk about school."

“Okay.” His heart was pounding, his breathing fast from the chase and the electricity between them. He searched her eyes, her face, and watched as the humor fell away and left behind a longing that had always been there, a longing so deep Alex wasn’t sure he could draw his next breath without her. “Holly ...”

She could feel it too ... her smoky eyes told him that much. “We ... we need to get back on the trail.”

“All I need,” he drew her closer and kissed her, “is you.” The headiness of that kiss, the intoxicating way it felt to have her in his arms alone in a place where only God could see them, left him no choice but to tell her how he was feeling. He let himself get lost in her eyes. “I love you, Holly.”

“I know.” Joy filled her face and she took the slightest step back, giving the passion between them a chance to dissipate, allowing a way back to familiar ground. She giggled and turned around, running back up the hill toward the trail.

“Wait!” He ran after her and when he’d nearly caught her, she faced him again and he searched her eyes. “What do you mean ... *you know*?”

“Because ...” Her hair framed her tanned face, and she’d never looked more beautiful. “... I’ve loved you since that day in middle school at your parents’ kitchen table.” She tilted her head, only partly serious. “Same as you.” She was off again, back onto the trail where they were in view of the others, safe from the power of their feelings.

But before the camping trip ended a few days later, Alex and Holly walked to the lakeshore one night and sat together on a tree stump, watching the moon on the water. Alex avoided kissing her, because out there ... well, out there if he started he wasn’t sure he could stop. Instead they talked about a Bible verse from Jeremiah 29, and how God knew the plans He had for His people.

“You know what I hope?” Holly’s voice mixed with the breeze off the lake and washed over him in a way he could still remember.

“What?” He couldn’t take his eyes off her. “What wonderful thing do you hope for, Holly Brooks?”

She smiled. “I hope God’s plans for me always include you.”

“They will.” His answer was as quick as it was certain. “Because I meant what I said a few days ago.” He touched the side of her cheek, wanting her to see the seriousness in his eyes. “I love you, Holly.”

For a long time neither of them looked away, and with indelible ink the

moment wrote itself across Alex's heart. Finally Holly touched her fingers to his, her eyes seeing deep inside him. "I love you too. So don't ever leave me, okay?"

"I won't." He pulled her close, and she rested her head against his chest. Alex was never sure how long they stayed there that night. The fact was, in some ways no matter how much he tried to let go of her memory, she was still there. Sitting beside him in the moonlight in the Adirondacks, knowing they would never leave each other for anything.

Alex took a deep breath and again willed the memories to leave. He squinted at the house ahead of him. Still no movement, so maybe tonight wasn't the night to catch them in the act. But that didn't discourage him. As long as he knew their meeting place, he'd be back, and their meeting would break and he'd follow them down the hill until they put their plates back on, or maybe he'd come on a day that wasn't Wednesday and the house would be empty and he could look around, maybe stumble onto something that gave him probable cause to search the place.

He turned the key in the engine, kept his lights off, and slowly pulled out of his hiding place in the bushes. Bo stirred in the back, and Alex heard him scramble to a sitting position.

"It's okay, Bo ... we're going home." Alex waited until he was halfway down the winding road before he turned on his headlights and picked up speed.

The thing that bothered him most about Holly was that he'd hurt her. Even after his dad died in the terrorist attacks, the last thing he'd wanted was to harm her in any way. He tried to explain it to her, that when the terrorists had killed his dad, they'd killed something inside of him too. He couldn't love like he'd loved before.

He wanted to live his life as a memorial to his father, and that left no room for relationships. Holly didn't believe him at first. She figured all Alex needed was to work through his anger and loss, and they could be fine again, the way they'd been before. But she was wrong. The part that laughed and loved and trusted God wasn't broken inside Alex; it was gone. Forever gone. And he could never subject Holly to a lifetime with someone who was no longer capable of those kinds of feelings.

He reached the on-ramp and sped up as he entered the Ventura Freeway again, this time south toward his townhouse. He hadn't talked to her in many years, and that could only be good for Holly. By now she would've met someone kind and trustworthy, someone with the faith he'd walked away from. He tightened his hold on the steering wheel. Yes, she was probably married and starting a family, smack in the middle of a life she perfectly deserved.

His precious Holly.

Because it wasn't that he no longer cared about her, and that's the part he never could get her to understand. No one would ever take Holly's place in his heart. He would die for her right now if it meant assuring her happiness, giving her the life she had dreamed of having all those years ago on that moonlit night by the lake. No matter how he tried to explain himself, Holly couldn't see that his care for her was what forced him to leave, what drove him to load up his car and move as far away from New York as possible. She didn't understand that releasing her was maybe his greatest and final act of love, because it nearly killed him to do it. But in the end he had no choice. The part inside him that could've made Holly happy the rest of his life was no longer there. It was dead.

In its place was a gritty, larger-than-life determination to take out the evil around him. If God was going to stand by and watch while four hundred firefighters and police officers lost their lives on 9/11, then Alex would use every waking hour he had making sure it wouldn't happen again. He would do the job himself. He wouldn't fight the fires; he would protect the firefighters. He would protect the whole city, for that matter. Taking down one bad guy after another was his single focus. Alex Brady and Bo against the world; that was his life now, and it left no room for anyone else. Not his mother, who had remarried some guy Alex didn't even know, not his friends back in New York or the God he used to trust. And especially not Holly.

Even if her memory haunted him as long as he lived.

Hoofstuk 7

Daar is 'n plek diep in die klipharde hart van Alex Brady waar dit altyd 10 September sal wees, die dag voor sy pa werk toe is en nooit weer huis toe gekom het nie. Alex besoek hierdie plek nie gereeld nie, maar wanneer die herinneringe hom oorweldig soos nou, het hy geen keuse as om dit te aanvaar nie.

Holly Brooks het ondertoe in die straat gebly, en in die laerskool was sy die irriterende meisie wat elke oggend probeer het om deel te word van sy vriendekring en saam met hulle klas toe gestap het. Alex sal nooit die dag vergeet toe dit verander het nie. Hy het eendag ná voetbaloefening by die huis gekom, en Holly en haar ouer sussie het saam met Alex se ma om die kombuistafel gesit.

“En hoe was jou oefening?” Sy ma het opgestaan en vir hom 'n glas melk ingegooi.

Alex het daar gestaan – kopskerm in die een hand, voetbaltrui in die ander. Hy was nie seker wat hy gevoel het nie, behalwe dat dit gevoel het of sy bene nie

meer aan sy lyf vas is nie, en hy kon homself nie sover kry om na enigiemand anders as Holly te kyk nie. Wanneer het sy grootgeword? En hoe het haar hare so lank geword?

Sy ma het agtergekom dat hy nie homself is nie; daarom het sy soort van gegiggel om almal op hulle gemak te probeer stel. “Holly en Heather is uit hulle huis gesluit. Hulle ma het ’n doktersafspraak en het vergeet om die sleutel vir hulle te bêre.”

Holly het vir hom geglimlag. “Jou ma het gesê ons kan hier bly.” Haar stem was sag en melodieus, en op daardie oomblik het Alex gevoel sy wêreld gaan nooit weer dieselfde wees nie. Hy het vir haar geknik, sy glas melk gedrink en gaan stort.

Dinge het nie dadelik verander nie. Maar ná daardie dag sou hy homself vang waar hy die langer paadjie na die volgende klas toe kies, net om vir haar hallo te sê. Teen die tyd dat hulle hoërskool toe is, het Holly elke dag saam met hom huis toe geloop. Haar ma se werk het haar daardie herfs voltyds besig gehou en haar ouer sussie het ook ná skool gewerk; daarom het Holly nêrens gehad om heen te gaan nie behalwe na Alex se huis.

Daardie jaar het almal geweet wat nie een van hulle gereed was om te erken nie: Hulle was gek na mekaar. Iewers tydens daardie winter het Holly vir die eerste keer saam met Alex se gesin kerk toe gegaan, en dit het gelei tot ’n telefoongesprek wat die hele aand geduur het en hulle twee in hulle onderskeie beddens wakker gehou het terwyl hulle vir mekaar gefluister het totdat die son opkom.

“Julle leraar het gesê God is ’n mens se vriend. Glo jy dit regtig?” het Holly gefluister.

“Natuurlik.” Hy het sy lag onderdruk sodat sy ouers hom nie hoor nie. “Jy kan enige tyd met Hom praat. Net soos jy met my praat.”

Die herinneringe krap sy siel soos splinters. Alex strek sy bene na die passasierskant van sy bakkie. Die ironie van die gesprek wat hy lank terug met Holly gehad het, verseker hom dat hy dit nooit sal vergeet nie. Hy het nie weer met God gepraat sedert die oggend in September toe reddingswerkers opgehou soek het na oorlewendes nie. Maar voor daardie dag kon niks sy geloof laat wankel het nie. Dit het so stewig gestaan soos die Twin Towers.

Holly het hom verder uitgevra, vir hom meer vrae oor die Bybel gevra en hoe hy sonder twyfel kon weet wat hy lees, is waar. Dit was nie dat Holly nie in God geglo het nie. Haar ouers het die gesin tydens Kersfees en Paasfees kerk toe gevat, en êrens in die huis was ’n Bybel onder stof wat hulle by Holly se oupagrootjie geërf het. Hulle het geglo soos baie mense glo. Dat daar êrens op die agtergrond ’n God aan die werk is wat alles geskep het. Maar om te glo het nie iets meer persoonlik as dit geword nie. Om saam met Alex te wees, om tydens hulle eerste jaar op hoërskool sy vriendin te wees, het alles vir albei van hulle verander. Veral die manier waarop Holly oor God gedink het.

Daardie somer het hulle twee na ’n Young Life-kamp toe gegaan, en hulle geloof het selfs sterker geword. Laat een aand toe die kampeerders

veronderstel was om te slaap en die deure gesluit moes wees, het Alex haar buite by die massiewe esdoringboom ontmoet. Dit was warm en die paddas het in die verte geroep terwyl hulle langs mekaar gesit het en na die sterre gekyk het terwyl hulle hande vashou.

“Eendag sal ons na ’n vreemde land miljoene kilometers weg gaan en sendelinge word. Sodat ons alles kan deel wat ons oor God leer.” Holly se oë het in die maanlig geblink.

“Kom ons maak dit ’n land met ’n strand en warm water.” Hulle al twee het gelag en onskuld het in die lug gehang. Hulle het mekaar nie gesoen nie; ook nie in die volgende paar maande nie. Nie totdat sy gesin ’n Nuwejaarspartytjie in hulle graad 10-jaar gehou het, en Alex Holly gekry het waar sy na foto’s in hulle leefvertrek kyk nie.

“Hier is jy.” Hy het vir haar ’n glas koeldrank gebring. “Kom jong, almal speel stomstreke.” Hy het in die rigting van die deur geloop. “Jy moet sien hoe lyk my pa se voorstelling van ’n hoender wat die pad oorsteek. Hy is skreeusnaaks.”

Maar sy het ’n geraamde foto van Alex se ouers opgetel, met hulle arms om mekaar se skouers, terwyl hulle saam lag in ’n oomblik wat net hulle twee deel. “Dit is opreg, nè? Die manier waarop hulle mekaar liefhet?”

Haar vraag het hom onkant betrap. Hy het na haar en toe na die foto gekyk, en toe weer terug na haar, uit die veld geslaan. “Natuurlik is dit opreg.” Dit het hom toe eers getref, die rede hoekom sy vra, hoekom sy hom nooit na haar huis toe genooi het nie, maar eerder al haar vrye tyd by hom deurgebring het. Hy het nader aan haar geloop. “Jou ouers ... is nie soos dit nie?”

“Nee.” Die hartseer in haar oë het haar glimlag oorskadu. Sy het weer na die foto gestaar. “Nooit.” Sy het gehuiwer, asof sy nie seker was hoe om dit te sê nie. “Hulle baklei die hele tyd, en my ma ... sy drink baie.” Sy het die foto teruggesit op die rak en omgedraai na Alex toe. “Dit is seker nie so erg nie. Dit is net ... ” Sy het verby hom gekyk na die gelag wat in die vertrek langsaan opgeklank het. “Dit is nie soos jou ouers nie.”

Alex het aan iets probeer dink om te sê, ’n manier hoe hy die situasie vir haar beter kan maak. Miskien as haar ouers met syne praat, of as die twee gesinne saam begin kerk toe gaan ... Hy het sy mond oopgemaak om vir haar te sê hoe hy voel, maar voordat hy enigiets kon sê, was die oomblik verby. Sy het haar hartseer op die agtergrond geskuif en sy hand gevat. “Kom ons gaan kyk hoe jou pa soos ’n hoender maak.”

Hulle was besig om die vertrek te verlaat toe hulle ’n stukkie *mistletoe* bo hulle koppe sien hang. Alex is nie seker wie eerste gaan staan het nie, maar skielik was hulle onder die *mistletoe*. Hulle oë het mekaar geterg, maar terselfdertyd was hulle ook bang. Alex het die eerste stap geneem. Hy het met sy hand aan haar wang geraak en sy lippe sag op hare gesit. Nie een van hulle het enigiets van soen af geweet nie; daarom was die oomblik so gou verby as wat dit begin het.

Maar terwyl hulle teruggestap het na die leefvertrek, terwyl hulle langs

mekaar op die bank gesit en kyk het hoe sy pa al in die rondte pronk en geluide soos 'n hoender maak, het hulle 'n geheim gedeel wat net hulle s'n was.

Hy probeer die herinnering vergeet, maar hy kry dit nie heeltemal reg nie. Op die agterste sitplek van die bakkie strek Bo homself uit en gaap raserig, en Alex draai na sy honde-kollega. Hy beweeg sy pote in sy slaap – iets wat hy gereeld doen, veral op dae wat hy nie genoeg gehardloop het nie, of wanneer hy angstig is om te werk. “Ek is hier by jou, Bo ... ” Hy kyk weer na die huis waar die ROA-lede steeds vergader. “Ek sal nou nogal van 'n bietjie aksie hou.”

Maar dit lyk nie of die mans van plan is om vinnig huis toe te gaan nie, en so ook gaan die herinneringe wat om sy aandag veg, nie weg nie. Hy leun vorentoe en rus met sy arm op die stuurwiel. Dinge tussen hom en Holly het nooit tot die gekompliseerde gebied van die fisieke gevorder soos in die meeste tieners se lewe nie. Hulle twee het mekaar skaars gesoen, en wanneer hulle wel het, was dit piksoentjies, meer soos 'n vriendskaplike soen. Amper asof hulle van die begin af geweet het hulle kan nie vriende én meer as dit wees nie. Hulle kon liefde kies wat in geloof geanker is, of die stomende verhoudings wat al hul vriende gehad het. Eersgenoemde het vir hulle 'n vriendskap gegee wat baie sterker was as die kortstondige verhoudings van hul maats, en teen die somer voor hulle laaste skooljaar, die somer van 2001, was Alex en Holly onafskeidbaar.

Teen daardie tyd moes haar ouers gesien het wat Alex en sy gesin gedeel het, dat hul jongste dogter verkies het om by die huis bo in die straat te wees eerder as by haar eie huis. Wat dit ook al was, Holly se ouers het begin om elke week saam met Alex se ouers kerk toe te gaan, en Holly se ma het ophou drink. Die twee gesinne het gereeld saam gekuier.

Alex maak sy oë toe en fluister haar naam soos hy dit in jare nie gesê het nie. “Holly, my meisie ... ek hoop jy het iemand beter as ek ontmoet ... ”

Skielik is hy in die Adirondacks waar hy saam met sy ouers en Holly en haar gesin op die voetslaanpad om Elkmeer stap. Dit was Julie en die humiditeit was nie so hoog soos by Staten Island nie, en die donderstorm wat voorspel is, het toe nie so gebeur nie. Dit was die derde Saterdag van die maand, en Alex het daardie wonderlike gevoel gehad dat die somer vir ewig sal aanhou.

Hulle ouers was voor hulle op die voetslaanpad, en Holly se sussie het saam met hulle gestap. Alex het sy vingers deur Holly s'n gevleg en stadiger geloop. “Nou ja ... ons laaste skooljaar het aangebreek.”

“Sjuut.” Sy het giggel, en haar blou oë het gedans. “Dit is teen die reëls, jou domkop.”

“Watter reëls?” Hy was mal oor die manier hoe sy hulle verhouding opwindend en vol pret gehou het.

“Jy kan nie oor skool praat wanneer ons met vakansie is nie. Anders sal dit verdwyn ... ” Sy het haar hand uit syne losgemaak en haar oë het geterg. “ ... soos dit!” Sy het van die voetslaanpadjie af weggehardloop met 'n heuwel af

en hom uitgedaag om haar te volg. Die bome bo hulle het 'n blaredak gevorm. “Haai!” Hy het agter haar aan gehardloop, maar met so baie bome het sy byna onmiddellik verdwyn. Net toe hy haar wou roep, het sy van agter 'n massiewe boomstam uitgespring en hom om sy middel gegryp.

“Het jou!” Die blaredak bo hulle het haar gelag gedemp. Sy het voor hom gaan staan en haar vingers op sy lippe gesit. “Jy mag nie meer oor skool praat nie.”

“Goed.” Sy hart het vinnig geklop, en sy asem het gejaag van die hardloop en die gevoel wat tussen hulle was. Hy het haar in die oë gekyk, na haar gesig, en gesien hoe die humor verdwyn. 'n Verlange wat altyd daar was het agtergebly, 'n verlange so diep dat Alex nie seker was hy kon verder asemhaal sonder haar nie. “Holly ...”

Sy kon dit ook voel ... haar grys oë het dit vir hom gesê. “Ons ... ons moet weer op die voetslaanpaadjie kom.”

“Al wat ek nodig het ...” hy het haar nadergetrek en gesoen, “... is jy.” Die lighoofdige gevoel van die soen, die gevoel om haar in sy arms te hê alleen in 'n plek waar net God hulle kon sien, was oorweldigend. Dit het hom geen ander keuse gelaat as om vir haar te sê hoe hy voel nie. Hy het homself in haar oë verloor. “Ek is lief vir jou, Holly.”

“Ek weet.” Haar oë was vol vreugde en sy het effens teruggetree, die passie tussen hulle 'n kans gegee om te verdwyn, sodat dinge weer soos voorheen kon wees. Sy het gegiggel en omgedraai, met die heuwel op gehardloop, terug na die voetslaanpaadjie.

“Wag!” Hy het agter haar aan gehardloop, en net toe hy haar amper gevang het, het sy weer na hom gedraai en hy het diep in haar oë gekyk. “Wat bedoel jy ... jy weet?”

“Omdat ...” Haar hare het haar gesig omraam en sy het mooier as ooit gelyk. “... ek al lief is vir jou sedert daardie dag in die laerskool by julle huis se kombuistafel.” Sy draai haar kop skuins, ernstiger. “Net soos jy.” Toe het sy weer weggehardloop, terug op die voetslaanpaadjie waar die ander hulle kon sien, veilig, weg van die krag van hulle gevoelens.

Maar voordat die kampery 'n paar dae later verby was, het Alex en Holly een aand langs die meer gaan stap en saam op 'n boomstomp gaan sit, gekyk na die maan wat op die water weerkaats. Alex het dit vermy om haar te soen, want alleen in die donker ... wel, as hy begin het, is hy nie seker hy sou kon ophou nie. In plaas daarvan het hulle oor 'n Bybelvers in Jeremia 29 gepraat, en hoe God geweet het wat hy vir sy mense beplan.

“Weet jy wat hoop ek?” Holly se stem het met die bries van die meer se kant af gemeng en oor hom gespoel op 'n manier wat hy steeds kan onthou.

“Wat?” Hy kon sy oë nie van haar afhou nie. “Op watter wonderlike ding hoop jy, Holly Brooks?”

Sy het geglimlag. “Ek hoop God se plan vir my sluit jou altyd in.”

“Dit sal.” Hy het vinnig geantwoord, seker van sy saak. “Want ek bedoel wat ek 'n paar dae vantevore gesê het.” Hy het aan haar wang geraak sodat sy kon

sien dat sy oë ernstig is. “Ek is lief vir jou, Holly.”

Lank het nie een van hulle weggekyk nie, en die oomblik is met onuitwisbare ink op Alex se hart geskryf. Uiteindelik het Holly se vingers aan syne geraak, haar oë het tot diep binne-in hom gekyk. “Ek is lief vir jou ook. So moet my nooit los nie, oukei?”

“Ek sal nie.” Hy het haar nadergetrek, en sy het met haar kop teen sy bors gelê. Alex is nooit seker hoe lank hulle daardie aand daar gebly het nie. Die feit is, maak nie saak hoe hard hy probeer om van die herinnering ontslae te raak nie, op ’n manier is sy steeds daar. Sy sit steeds langs hom in die maanlig in die Adirondacks, met die wete dat hulle mekaar nooit vir enigiets sal verlaat nie.

Alex haal diep asem en probeer weereens van die herinneringe ontslae raak. Hy trek sy oë op skrefies en kyk na die huis voor hom. Daar is steeds geen beweging nie, so miskien is vanaand nie die aand om hulle op heterdaad te betrap nie. Maar dit ontmoedig hom nie. Solank hy weet waar hulle ontmoetingsplek is, sal hy terugkom, en as hulle klaar bymekaargekom het, sal hy hulle na onder volg totdat hulle hul nommerplate terugsit, of miskien sal hy op ’n ander dag as Woensdag kom en sal die huis leeg wees en dan kan hy rondkyk, dalk op iets afkom wat vir hom ’n rede gee om die plek te deursoek.

Hy sluit die bakkie aan, hou sy ligte af en trek stadig weg vanuit sy wegkruipplek agter die bosse. Bo beweeg in die agterkant en Alex hoor hoe hy homself optrek om te sit.

“Dit is oukei, Bo ... Ons is op pad huis toe.” Alex wag tot hy halfpad na onder is met die kronkelpaadjie voordat hy sy hoofligte aanskakel en vinniger begin ry.

Die ding wat hom die meeste oor Holly pla, is dat hy haar seergemaak het. Selfs nadat sy pa in die terroriste-aanvalle oorlede is, was die laaste ding wat hy wou doen om haar op enige manier seer te maak. Hy het dit aan haar probeer verduidelik, dat toe die terroriste sy pa doodgemaak het, hulle iets in hom ook doodgemaak het. Hy kon nie liefhê soos hy voorheen liefgehad het nie.

Hy wou sy lewe ter nagedagtenis aan sy pa leef, en dit het geen ruimte vir verhoudings gelaat nie. Holly het hom eers nie geglo nie. Sy het gedink al wat hy moes doen, was om sy woede en verlies te verwerk, en dan sal alles tussen hulle weer reg wees, soos dit voorheen was. Maar sy was verkeerd. Die deel in Alex wat gelag en liefgehad en op God vertrou het, was nie gebreek nie; dit was weg. Vir altyd weg. En hy kon Holly nooit onderwerp aan ’n leeftyd saam met iemand wat nie langer in staat was tot daardie tipe gevoelens nie.

Hy is by die oprit en ry vinniger toe hy op die Ventura-deurpad klim, hierdie keer in ’n suidelike rigting na sy huis toe. Hy het jare gelede met haar gepraat, en dit kan net goed wees vir haar. Teen hierdie tyd sou sy al iemand ontmoet het wat vriendelik is en vertrou kan word, iemand met die geloof waarvan hy afgesien het. Hy hou die stuurwiel stywer vas. Ja, sy is waarskynlik al getroud

en besig om met 'n gesin te begin, reg in die middel van 'n lewe wat sy definitief verdien.

Sy kosbare Holly.

Want dit is nie dat hy nie meer vir haar omgee het nie, en dit is die deel wat sy nooit kon verstaan nie. Niemand sal ooit Holly se plek in sy hart inneem nie. Hy is selfs bereid om vir haar te sterf as dit beteken hy kan haar gelukkig maak, om vir haar die lewe te gee waaroor sy jare gelede gedroom het op daardie maanverligte aand by die meer. Maak nie saak hoe hy dit probeer verduidelik het nie, Holly kon nie sien dat sy besorgdheid oor haar hom gedwing het om weg te gaan, en hom gedryf het om sy motor te pak en sover moontlik van New York af te trek nie. Sy het nie verstaan dat om haar te laat gaan moontlik sy grootste en laaste daad van liefde was nie, want dit het hom byna doodgemaak. Maar op die ou einde het hy nie 'n keuse gehad nie. Die deel binne-in hom wat Holly vir die res van sy lewe gelukkig kon maak, was nie meer daar nie. Dit was dood.

In die plek daarvan is die vasberadenheid om van die boosheid om hom ontslae te raak; 'n vasberadenheid wat groter as die lewe is en hom dag en nag pla. As God niks wou doen nie en toekyk hoe vierhonderd brandweer- en polisiemanne op 11 September sterf, sal Alex elke uur wat hy het, gebruik om seker te maak dit gebeur nie weer nie. Hy sal dit maar self doen. Hy sal nie die brande bestry nie; hy sal die brandweermanne beskerm. Hy sal die hele stad beskerm. Om die een skelm na die ander tronk toe te stuur, is sy enigste fokus. Alex Brady en Bo teen die wêreld; dit is waaruit sy lewe nou bestaan en dit laat geen ruimte vir enigiemand anders nie. Nie vir sy ma wat weer getroud is met 'n man wat Alex nie eers ken nie, nie vir sy vriende in New York of die God wat hy in die verlede vertrou het nie. En veral nie vir Holly nie. Selfs al bly die herinnering aan haar vir die res van sy lewe by hom spook.

EIGHT

Clay was at the Monterey Park department headquarters about to work through a series of tactical drills with a dozen SWAT officers when the call came across his radio. Hostage situation at a bar in East LA, two fatalities confirmed, eight people trapped inside with the gunman. But the detail that grabbed Clay's heart and made him jerk his radio from his belt so he could hear more clearly was this one: The standoff was taking place across the street from an elementary school, where more than five hundred students were in session.

Joe must've heard the call at the same time, because he jogged over from the group he'd been working with, his eyes wide. "Captain's made the call. He wants both our units on the scene immediately."

"Got it." He welcomed the familiar rush of adrenaline, the way his heart pounded into action as he signaled his men and explained the situation. In a hurry, Clay's and Joe's groups both ran the distance across the field to the station, where each man made sure he was doubly armed, and in less than five minutes they were in a convoy of squad cars racing through the streets. Halfway there, Clay heard the call for the closest K9 unit to respond, also.

A moment later Alex's voice came over the radio. "Ten-four. On my way."

Dispatch updated them with the latest details. Four squad cars were already at the scene, and communication had begun between them and the gunman. The guy was heavily armed, threatening to kill the eight hostages in the building, then hit the school.

Clay gritted his teeth. If the guy ran, he'd be taken out in a matter of seconds, but maybe not before he sprayed a load of bullets at the school. He added his voice to those crossing the police radio waves. "We'll send a couple of our cars to the school. Make sure the kids are rounded up on the other side of the building, away from the shooter."

"Ten-four, Sergeant Michaels. We'll contact the school principal and tell them you're on your way."

“ETA three minutes,” Clay barked. His sirens were on and he was in the lead, clicking the stoplights so they’d be green as the line of squad cars reached each intersection. His mind raced with possibilities. What if the gunman wasn’t working alone? If he was making threats about the school he could have one or several accomplices ready to take hostages in the building. The school was in lockdown mode, but that didn’t protect the teachers and kids inside from an aggressive attack, from bad guys willing to bust through windows or shoot their way through doors.

Clay picked up his radio again. “Reynolds, you copy?”

“Copy, go ahead.”

“Have your guys surround the school. Every side. We don’t want anyone getting in that building.”

“Roger that.” Joe didn’t need an explanation. He and Clay handled the big calls like they were thinking with one brain. Together they were known as the smartest SWAT officers in the department. It was the reason they’d both been promoted to sergeant, in charge of training the new guys.

But a call like this one would test everything they knew about police work. As they rounded the corner, they saw the squad cars ahead and the barricaded traffic barriers, and Clay did what he always did at this point in a call. “Please, God, be with us ... give us Your eyes and Your wisdom, Your strength and Your protection.” He could hear the adrenaline in his raspy, whispered voice. “Go before us, God ... in Jesus’s name, amen.”

For a fleeting moment he thought about Jamie, about how well she handled his job and the possibility that on any given day Clay could take a call like this one and lose his life in the process. But as soon as the thought hit, he dismissed it. He and Jamie lived their lives based on trust in God. Life was His to give, and one day it would be His to take. For every person walking the earth. As for this specific call, Clay believed he was coming home at the end of the night. God was with him; he could feel His presence, His guidance.

He screeched his squad car to a stop, using another parked squad car as a cover. The other men did the same thing, creating a series of objects they could hide and duck behind as they worked to surround the front and back doors of the bar. In his peripheral vision, Clay watched Joe and his men whip around the opposite corner and head for the front of the school. In two minutes the building would be surrounded, and the danger to the students would be almost entirely eliminated.

Clay focused on the volatile situation at hand. The bar was a small single-story brick building with dark windows and a limited parking lot. Six civilian

cars sat in the lot, three facing the establishment, three facing the road and the school across the street. From what he could tell, the three facing the bar were empty, but he wasn't sure about the others.

"Benson," Clay nodded to the SWAT officer nearest him. "Keep an eye on the cars facing the road. Look for an accomplice."

"Yes, sir." Benson stayed low and scrambled to the last row of squad cars, his gun pointed in the general direction of the parked cars facing the road.

One more threat down.

Clay needed to work his way around to the left side of the building, the corner closest to the front door. That was where a deputy now hovered, gun drawn, using a bullhorn to talk to the gunman.

"I said, 'Put your guns down and come out with your hands up,'" the deputy shouted the words, and they echoed loudly through the parking lot.

There was no response, but at that moment Alex's squad car squealed to a stop a few feet from where the initial deputies were gathered, at the left corner of the building. In seconds, he was out of the car with Bo on a leash and ready to go. He positioned himself adjacent to the officer with the bullhorn, gun raised in one hand, Bo's leash tight in his other. Clay watched Alex give his dog a command, and immediately the dog began barking, straining at his leash.

Suddenly, there was an explosion of glass as the gunman kicked his foot through the front window of the bar. "Hey!" he screamed. He used his elbow to push out the rest of the windowpane, and at the same time let loose a string of expletives. "Get the dog outta here or I start shooting!"

Clay was the sergeant in charge of the scene, and he signaled to Alex. Instantly, Alex uttered another command to his K9 partner, and the dog stopped barking and sat stone still at Alex's side.

The gunman waved an assault rifle through the broken window. "I want a thousand dollars, you hear me?" he shouted. His voice was wired and crazed — the guy had to be high on something. "Hear me? I want a thousand dollars."

One of the deputies took the bullhorn and brought it to Clay. He was still using a squad car for cover, his gun in his hand, finger on the trigger. He had a direct shot at the guy, but he wouldn't shoot unless he had to. He raised the bullhorn. "This is Sergeant Michaels. You're surrounded by SWAT officers. The game's over, so put your gun down and come out of the building with your hands up."

Another string of cuss words came from the guy. "I'll kill every one of you!"

"No, you won't." From the corner of his eye, Clay saw Alex stay low with his dog, moving from the cover of one squad car to the next. Clay wasn't sure where the deputy was going, but he hadn't been ordered to move. He raised the bullhorn again. "Put your gun down and come out with your hands up."

Deputies were in place all around the building, but they needed to wait, take their time. They couldn't rush a hostage situation like this, not when innocent lives were on the line inside the building. Clay was about to give the gunman another directive, when from behind him he heard a car door and a round of gunfire. A man started, "I've got the school ... I've got the school!"

A bullet grazed the side of Clay's vest as he took cover low between two squad cars. He turned in time to see the entire drama unfold in a handful of seconds. Alex had maneuvered himself to a position behind the row of parked civilian cars, so when the second gunman leapt from one of them and started shooting, Alex was in position to take him down.

The commotion brought the first gunman scrambling out the broken front window, shouting for his friend, gun raised. But before he could spray the scene with bullets, Bo burst across the parking lot, flew over the hood of a single parked car, and landed on the perpetrator, biting hold of his arm and flinging him to the ground. His assault rifle fell to one side, and the man screamed for help. All the while Bo continued to bite, wrestling with the man and keeping him away from his weapon.

With the situation stable, the SWAT team immediately surrounded both gunmen and Alex ran to his dog. Once the first gunman was cuffed, Alex called out to Bo. "Release!"

Instantly, the dog relaxed his bite hold on the man and returned to Alex's side, panting and ready to make another attack if necessary. Clay watched the entire scene from his place with three other SWAT members, all of them with guns drawn and aimed at the second gunman. The man had lost his weapon, and he was bleeding out, too injured to be a threat.

"We need an ambulance," Clay radioed. "We have a gunman down."

In a hurry, paramedics came for the second gunman, and another pair tended to the bite wounds on the arm of the first guy. After that, deputies loaded the less-injured gunman into a squad car and took him to the men's jail. By then, Clay and several of his men had rushed the building and released the hostages. The coroner's office came for the two bodies inside the bar – both employees. Each of the hostages had to be questioned, so Clay assigned four detectives to the task. By then Clay had already informed Joe that the situation was

diffused. Joe promised to lead his men in a complete check of the school and then give the principal the okay to call off the lockdown.

Only after all that was finished did Clay find Benson talking with the other SWAT guys. Clay pulled him aside, frustrated. "What happened back there?"

"I didn't see him, sir. I was watching the cars like you told me, but I had to keep an eye on the gunman too." Benson blinked, apologetically. "I ... I didn't see him."

Clay touched his fingers to the side of his uniform, where an indentation on his vest told him how close he'd come to taking a bullet. Alex had saved his life today, and possibly the lives of every SWAT officer whose back was to the second gunman. But he'd done it by breaking protocol, by leaving his post and handling the scene his own way. Again. Clay scanned the crime scene. "Where's Brady?"

"In his car, sir." Benson clearly felt terrible about the situation. He hadn't done anything wrong, specifically, and he wouldn't be written up. But missing the second gunman was a big mistake. Clay strode across the parking lot to the place where Alex's squad car was still angled next to the left side of the building. Alex was sitting in the driver's seat, door open, his feet on the ground. Inches away sat Bo, still ready if he was needed. Water dripped from the dog's jowls, and a half-empty bowl sat next to him on the ground.

Clay studied the young deputy, the emptiness in his eyes, and he thought he understood what the guy might be thinking. The reprimand could come later. "He's still alive. For now, anyway." Clay leaned against the building so the two were facing each other. "You had to shoot him."

Alex didn't respond, didn't blink. He looked like he was too far away to connect with the moment.

A sigh came from Clay, his body drained from the intensity of the scene. "I've been there." He lifted his eyes to the smoggy pale blue sky overhead. "It was a day like this one, routine traffic stop on the Ventura Freeway. Turned out to be a carjacker wanted for murder." Clay remembered the incident like it was happening still, right now, before his eyes. "I pulled him over, but before I could leave my car, he was running toward me, firing at me. I had no choice but to return fire, and that was that. The guy died there on the side of the road."

Alex seemed to return to the present. He patted Bo between the ears and looked hard at Clay. "One less bad guy on the streets, right?"

His answer was understandable, but it didn't sound like Alex, and it didn't

match the deep pain in his voice. No matter how many bad guys he arrested or took out, their loss of freedom or life would never bring his father back.

Clay leaned against Alex's squad car. "You didn't have permission to leave your location. No one told you to take Bo to the other side of the parking lot."

"I had a feeling." There was no apology in Alex's eyes. "I saw something move in one of the cars, and I wanted to be ready."

"In police work it's not about what *you* want. Orders are meant to be followed." Clay struggled with the reprimand. After all, it was Alex's instinct and feelings that prevented a tragedy to day.

"I was following orders, sir." Anger flashed across Alex's face. "I was instructed to provide backup. Me and my partner did that."

Clay thought about that. Alex had a point. He hadn't specifically been assigned to any one area, only to provide backup. The fact that he'd moved from one spot to another without exact orders wasn't — on its face — a violation of instructions.

Three SWAT guys passed by then, and one of them — Benson — pointed at Alex. "Bravest police work I ever saw, Brady. Way to go."

Alex nodded his thanks at the guy and returned his attention to Clay.

Futility washed over Clay regarding the situation. Any discipline now would be little more than a joke. Everyone on the call that day would've agreed with the comment from the SWAT deputy. Alex and Bo had acted on instinct, yes, but they were heroes for their actions that day. Nothing less.

Clay massaged his temples and released an overdue sigh. "You know the book. You'd established position, and because of the danger in the situation, you needed to receive permission or instruction before moving."

"I saw something suspicious in one of the parked cars." Alex knew the book, knew it well enough to know that by stating he'd seen something suspicious, he created cause for leaving his implied post. For all his passion and determination on the job, he never broke the rules.

Clay narrowed his eyes. "Tell me something." He hesitated, as if he was trying his best to read Alex's mind. "Did you see the suspect's gun before you opened fire?"

Alex held his stare but only for a few beats. When he looked down, the answer was obvious. "I saw a gun." He looked up. "Yes, sir."

Clay didn't want to push the issue, didn't want to force Alex into a corner that would leave neither of them a way out. Alex was well aware of the rules, no question about that. But the thing with police work was that sometimes the rules didn't quite fit. He took a step forward and put his hand on Alex's shoulder. "You worry me, Brady. You rely a little too much on instinct." He thought about the conversation they'd had the other night over dinner, the one about the REA. But this wasn't the time to bring up examples. "I will say that in this situation, Benson is right. You acted on your instincts and you saved lives." He patted Alex's back. "Mine included. You did good today, Brady. Very good." He stooped down and patted Bo beneath the chin. "You too, Bo. Good work."

The dog cocked his head to one side, but he stayed otherwise motionless at Alex's side.

Alex spoke to him. "Down, Bo." The dog cast loyal eyes in Alex's direction, then he stretched out his front paws and laid down on the asphalt, at ease.

"That's a heck of a dog you've got there." Clay had been around K9 units every day for the past three years, the entire time since he'd been promoted to SWAT sergeant. Always, the connection between deputy and dog was a strong one, but the bond between Alex and Bo was in a category all by itself. "How did he know to go for the other gunman, the one standing in the window?"

"I already had the guy in the parking lot." Alex stroked his hand along Bo's back. "We're a team."

"Right." Clay felt his heart go out to the young deputy. The guy was such an island, so cut off from everyone but his dog and his job. Clay took a step back. "Well, anyway, regardless of how it happened, you made the department proud today, Brady. I mean that." He hesitated. "Just be careful."

Alex peered up at him, squinting in the midday sunlight. He didn't smile, and none of the emptiness from before faded even a little. "Thanks, Sarge. I appreciate that. I'll try to look for permission next time."

It was the right answer, but that's all it was. Clay understood. The thing that drove Alex Brady to fight crime lived deep within him, not on the pages of a sheriff's department handbook. He gave Alex a final pat on the shoulder. "Get your dog some lunch, Brady. See you back at the station."

Clay finished with his paperwork and made sure the detectives had everything they needed. Then, after every other SWAT deputy was released back to the station, Clay walked to his car and left the scene. The whole drive back he tried to put his finger on exactly what was bothering him about the call that

day, why he wasn't as in awe of Alex's work as everyone else.

He rolled down his window and rested his arm on the door, letting the warm late summer breeze wash over him. *Help me, Lord ... am I being too critical?*

A Bible verse flashed in his mind ... one he'd come across last week in the early hours of the morning, the time of day when it was just him and God, getting ready for another shift. The verse was from Proverbs, chapter 14. *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads only to death.*

What did the verse mean in relation to the prayer he'd just uttered? Clay focused on the road and sorted through the possibilities. Certainly the Scripture applied to the bad guys. It described everything about them. But how did it work for someone like himself, or Alex? Clay slowed his car, wanting to stretch out the trip back. When it came to Alex, Clay had avoided talking about the one way the young guy could find peace — a rock solid faith in Christ. Clay was waiting for the right opportunity, the barbecue when Alex didn't seem so intense, or the moment when talking about God felt somehow appropriate.

But what if that moment never came? There was a way that seemed right to man, but in the end it would lead only to death, right? So the verse certainly applied to the young deputy. Clay doubled his determination. He would find a chance to talk to Alex about his beliefs, even if the timing didn't feel right. Even if it created the most uncomfortable moment in Clay's entire life. Certainty girded up his determination. He would seize the next possible opportunity.

Because the way that seemed right to Alex was whatever his heart told him, possibly even taking the law into his own hands. Everything Alex did, the way he was courageous on a crime scene, the way he worked with his dog, and the stony look of determination in his eyes — all of it told anyone watching that Alex Brady had one way that was right to him. He was responsible for eliminating any crime he came across without the help of anyone. Not even God.

That would never work, of course. One of these days, Alex was going to reach the end of himself, because no man could eliminate all the evil around him. Dealing with evil was something only the Lord could do, and in His timing He most certainly would deal with it. Clay was sobered by the truth, as if a new awareness had dawned on his understanding of Alex Brady. As he finished the drive back to headquarters, he prayed fervently for Alex, that the ways that seemed right to the young deputy would indeed take him to the end of himself, and that when he reached that place he would not find death.

But life, the abundant life God planned for him.

Hoofstuk 8

Clay is by die hoofkantoor in Monterey Park en wil net begin om met 'n klompie SWAT-lede deur 'n reeks taktiese militêre oefening te gaan toe die boodskap oor sy radio deurkom. Daar is mense wat as gyselaars in 'n kroeg in die ooste van Los Angeles aangehou word, twee mense is reeds dood, en agt is steeds vasgevang saam met die gewapende man. Maar die besonderhede wat Clay se hart inmekaar laat krimp en hom na die radio aan sy gordel laat gryp sodat hy beter kan hoor, is dat dit besig is om te gebeur oorkant 'n skool waar meer as vyfhonderd leerders skoolgaan.

Joe moes ook die boodskap gehoor het, want hy draf vanaf die groep waarmee hy werk, sy oë groot. “Die kaptein wil albei ons eenhede onmiddellik op die toneel hê.”

“Goed so.” Hy verwelkom die bekende gevoel van adrenalien wat deur sy are pomp, die manier waarop sy hart klop en hy oorgaan tot aksie toe hy sy manne van die situasie vertel en dit verduidelik. Clay en Joe se groepe hardloop baie vinnig oor die veld na die polisiestasie toe, waar elkeen seker maak hy het twee gewere, en in minder as vyf minute is daar 'n konvooi polisiemotors wat deur die strate jaag. Halfpad soontoe hoor Clay 'n oproep vir die naaste honde-eenheid om ook te reageer.

'n Oomblik later hoor hy Alex se stem oor die radio. “Tien-vier. Ek is op pad.”

Die inligting kom deur dat daar reeds vier polisiemotors op die toneel is en dat onderhandelings tussen hulle en die gewapende man begin het. Die man is swaar gewapen en dreig om die agt gyselaars in die gebou dood te maak en daarna die skool aan te val.

Clay kners op sy tande. As die man hardloop, sal hy binne sekondes doodgeskiet word, maar dalk nie voordat hy nie 'n paar skote in die rigting van die skool gevuur het nie. Hy praat ook nou saam met al die ander stemme oor die radio. “Ons sal 'n paar van ons motors na die skool toe stuur. Maak seker die kinders kom aan die ander kant van die gebou bymekaar, weg van die gewapende man.”

“Tien-vier, sersant Michaels. Ons sal die skoolhoof bel en laat weet jy is op pad.”

“Ons is oor drie minute daar.” Clay praat hard. Sy motor se sirene is aan en hy ry voor, maak seker die verkeersligte is groen elke keer wanneer die klomp polisiemotors 'n kruising moet oorsteek. Sy gedagtes word deur verskeie moontlikhede oorheers. Wat as die gewapende man nie alleen werk nie? As hy dreigemente oor die skool maak, het hy dalk een of meer handlangers wat gereed is om daar ook mense gyselaar te hou. Die skool se hekke is gesluit, maar dit beskerm nie die onderwysers en kinders van 'n aggressiewe aanval van misdadigers wat deur vensters sal spring en hul weg deur deure oopskiet

nie.

Clay tel weer sy radio op. “Reynolds, kan jy my hoor?”

“Ja, gaan voort.”

“Laat jou manne die skool omsingel. Ons wil nie hê enigiemand moet in die gebou in gaan nie.”

“Maak so.” Joe het nie ’n verduideliking nodig nie. Hy en Clay hanteer gevaarlike situasies soos hierdie asof hulle met dieselfde brein dink. Saam is hulle bekend as die slimste SWAT-offisiere in die polisie. Dit is hoekom hulle albei tot sersant bevorder is, in beheer daarvan om die nuwe ouens op te lei.

Maar ’n situasie soos hierdie sal alles toets wat hulle oor polisiewerk weet. Toe hulle om die draai kom, sien hulle die polisiemotors en verkeersversperrings voor hulle, en Clay doen wat hy altyd doen wanneer hy uitgeroep word. “Asseblief, Here, wees met ons ... gee vir ons u oë en wysheid, u krag en beskerming.” Hy kan die adrenalinie sy rasperstem hoor terwyl hy fluister. “Gaan voor ons uit, Here ... in Jesus se Naam, amen.”

Vir ’n oomblik dink hy aan Jamie, oor hoe goed sy sy werk hanteer en die moontlikheid dat Clay op enige dag soos vandag kan uitgaan en sy lewe in die proses kan verloor. Maar die oomblik toe hy daaraan dink, skuif hy dit uit sy gedagtes. Hy en Jamie leef met hulle lewens geanker in vertroue op God. Die lewe is Syne om te gee, en eendag sal dit Syne wees om te neem. Dit geld vir elke persoon op die aarde. Maar nou, in hierdie spesifieke situasie, glo Clay dat hy aan die einde van die dag sal teruggaan huis toe. God is by hom; hy kan sy teenwoordigheid, sy leiding aanvoel.

Hy trap rem en sy polisiemotor kom met skreeuende bande tot stilstand, en hy gebruik ’n ander stilstaande polisiemotor as beskerming. Die ander polisiemanne doen dieselfde, en skep ’n muur waaragter hulle kan weggkruip terwyl hulle probeer om die voor- en agterdeur van die kroeg te omsingel. Uit die hoek van sy oog sien Clay hoe Joe en sy manne om die teenoorgestelde hoek hardloop na die voorkant van die skool. Binne twee minute gaan die gebou omsingel wees en daar sal byna geen gevaar vir die kinders wees nie.

Clay fokus op die plofbare situasie voor hom. Die kroeg is ’n klein steengeboutjie met donker vensters en het ’n klein parkeerarea. Daar staan ses motors geparkeer, drie met hulle neuse in die rigting van die kroeg en die ander drie in die rigting van die straat en skool daar oorkant. Sover hy kan sien, is die drie wat in die rigting van die kroeg kyk leeg, maar hy is nie seker van die ander nie.

“Benson,” Clay knik in die rigting van die SWAT-offisier die naaste aan hom. “Hou ’n oë op daardie motors wat met hul neuse in die rigting van die straat geparkeer is. Wees op die uitkyk vir ’n handlanger.”

“Goed, Meneer.” Benson bly laag op die grond en beweeg na die laaste ry polisiemotors, sy geweer in die rigting van die geparkeerde motors wat met hul neuse na die straat geparkeer staan.

Nog ’n bedreiging onder beheer.

Clay moet aan die linkerkant van die gebou kom, die hoek die naaste aan die

voordeur. Daar waar 'n polisieman nou op sy hurke sit, gereed om te skiet, en 'n megafoon gebruik om met die gewapende man te praat.

“Ek het gesê: ‘Sit jou wapens neer en kom uit met jou hande in die lug,’” skree die polisieman die woorde uit en dit eggo hard deur die parkeerarea.

Daar is geen reaksie nie, maar op dieselfde oomblik bring Alex sy polisiemotor skreeuend tot stilstand, 'n paar meter van waar die eerste polisiemanne saamgekom het by die linkerkantste hoek van die gebou. Binne sekondes is hy uit sy motor met Bo aan 'n leiband en gereed om tot aksie oor te gaan. Hy hardloop tot na aan die offisier met die megafoon, met sy geweer in die lug en Bo se leiband styf in die ander hand. Clay kyk hoe Alex vir sy hond 'n bevel gee, en onmiddellik begin hy blaf en aan sy leiband ruk.

Skielik ontplof die glas toe die gewapende man met sy voet deur die voorste venster van die kroeg skop. “Haai!” skree hy. Hy gebruik sy elmboog om die res van die venster uit te druk, en terselfdertyd uiter hy 'n paar vloekwoorde. “Vat die hond weg of ek begin skiet!”

Clay is die sersant in beheer van die situasie en hy gee vir Alex 'n teken. Onmiddellik gee Alex vir sy honde-kollega nog 'n bevel, en die hond hou op blaf en sit doodstil langs Alex.

Die gewapende man waai met 'n geweer deur die gebreekte venster. “Ek wil duisend dollar hê, hoor julle my?” skree hy. Sy stem klink wild – die man moet onder die invloed van iets wees. “Hoor julle my? Ek wil duisend dollar hê.”

Een van die polisiemanne vat die megafoon en bring dit vir Clay. Hy skuil steeds agter 'n polisiemotor, geweer in die hand, vinger op die sneller. Hy is in so 'n posisie dat hy direk op die man kan skiet, maar hy sal nie as dit nie nodig is nie. Hy lig die luidspreker op. “Dit is sersant Michaels hier. Jy word omring deur SWAT-offisiere. Die speletjie is nou verby. Sit jou wapen neer en kom uit die gebou met jou hande in die lug.”

Die man skree nog 'n paar vloekwoorde uit. “Ek sal almal van julle doodmaak!”

“Nee, jy sal nie.” Uit die hoek van sy oog sien Clay hoe Alex en sy hond laag op die grond bly, en vir beskerming van die een polisiemotor na die ander beweeg. Clay is nie seker waarheen hy op pad is nie, maar hy het nie die opdrag gekry om te beweeg nie. Hy lig weer die luidspreker. “Sit jou wapen neer en kom uit met jou hande in die lug.”

Daar is polisiemanne rondom die gebou, maar hulle moet wag, hulle moenie haastig wees nie. Hulle moenie 'n gyselaarsdrama soos hierdie haas nie, nie wanneer onskuldige lewens in die gebou op die spel is nie. Clay is op die punt om weer met die gewapende man te praat, toe hy 'n motordeur en geweerskote agter hom hoor klap. Iemand skree: “Ek sal die skool aanval ... Ek sal die skool aanval!”

'n Koeël tref Clay se baadjie rakelings net toe hy laag tussen twee polisiemotors skuiling soek. Hy draai betyds om om die hele drama in 'n paar sekondes te sien af speel. Alex het op so 'n manier agter die ry motors in die

parkeerarea weggekruipt dat toe die tweede gewapende man uit een van die motors spring en begin skiet, Alex hom kon skiet.

Die opskudding laat die eerste gewapende man deur die gebreekte venster klim en hy skree vir sy vriend, sy geweer in die lug. Maar voordat hy kan begin skiet, hardloop Bo oor die parkeerarea, spring oor die enjinkap van 'n motor en land op die oortreder. Dan byt hy sy arm vas en trek hom grond toe. Die man se geweer val op die grond neer en hy skree om hulp. Bo laat los nie en stoei met die man terwyl hy hom van sy wapen af weghou.

Toe die situasie nie meer enige bedreiging inhou nie, omring die SWAT-offisiere dadelik albei die mans en Alex hardloop na sy hond toe. Toe die eerste man geboei is, beveel Alex vir Bo. "Laat los!"

Onmiddellik los Bo die man se arm en gaan sit hygend langs Alex, gereed om weer aan te val indien nodig. Clay hou saam met drie ander SWAT-lede die situasie dop van waar hul skuil, almal gereed met hul wapens, gerig op die tweede gewapende man. Die man het nie meer sy geweer nie en hy bloei, te beseer om 'n bedreiging te wees.

"Stuur 'n ambulans," sê Clay oor die radio. "Hier is 'n man wat geskiet is."

Die paramedici daag vinnig op om die tweede gewapende man te help en twee ander behandel die bytewonde op die eerste man se arm. Daarna laai polisiemanne hom in 'n polisiemotor en vat hom tronk toe. Teen hierdie tyd het Clay en 'n paar van sy manne in die gebou in gehardloop en die gyselaars bevry. 'n Lykswa kom haal die twee liggame in die kroeg – albei werknemers. Elkeen van die gyselaars moet ondervra word; daarom kry Clay vier speurders om voort te gaan daarmee. Teen hierdie tyd het Clay reeds vir Joe laat weet dat die situasie onder beheer is. Joe sê hy sal sy manne in die skool in stuur om seker te maak alles is veilig en dan die skoolhoof laat weet dat die leerders weer kan uitkom.

Nadat alles verby is, kry Clay vir Benson waar hy met ander SWAT-lede staan en praat. Clay roep hom eenkant toe, gefrustreerd. "Wat het gebeur?"

"Ek het hom nie gesien nie, Meneer. Ek het 'n ogie op die motors gehou, soos Meneer vir my gesê het, maar ek moes ook die gewapende man in die oog hou." Benson knip sy oë verskonend. "Ek ... ek het hom nie gesien nie."

Clay raak met sy vingers aan die kant van sy uniform, waar 'n inkeping aan sy baadjie 'n bewys is van hoe amper hy raakgeskiet is. Alex het vandag sy lewe gered, en moontlik ook die lewe van elke SWAT-offisier wie se rug na die tweede gewapende man gedraai was. Maar hy het nie by die protokol gehou nie. Hy het sy posisie verlaat en die situasie op sy eie manier hanteer. Al weer. Clay se oë gly oor die misdaadtoneel. "Waar is Brady?"

"In sy motor, Meneer." Benson voel duidelik baie sleg oor die situasie. Hy het nie iets spesifieks verkeerd gedoen nie, en hy sal nie oor die kole gehaal word nie, maar dat hy nie die tweede gewapende man gesien het nie, was 'n groot fout. Clay loop oor die parkeerarea na die plek waar Alex se polisiemotor steeds aan die linkerkant van die gebou geparkeer staan. Alex sit agter die stuurwiel met die deur oop, sy voete op die grond. By hom sit Bo, steeds

gereed indien iemand sy hulp nodig het. Water drup uit die hond se mond en daar staan 'n bak met 'n bietjie water langs hom op die grond.

Clay kyk stip na die jong polisieman, die leegheid in sy oë, en hy dink hy weet waaraan Alex dink. Hy sal hom later berispe. "Hy leef nog. Vir nou, in elk geval." Clay leun teen die muur sodat hulle na mekaar kyk. "Jy móés hom geskiet het."

Alex sê niks nie, knip nie eers sy oë nie. Dit lyk of hy ver verwyder is van die hier en nou.

Clay sug, moeg na die intensiteit van die gebeure. "Dit het al met my ook gebeur." Hy kyk na die ligte blou lug bo hulle. "Dit was 'n dag soos vandag. Ons moes motors op die Ventura-deurpad aftrek. Dit was 'n kaper wat gesoek is vir moord." Clay onthou die insident asof dit nou voor sy oë gebeur. "Ek het hom afgetrek, maar voordat ek uit my motor kon klim, het hy op my afgestorm en begin skiet. Ek het geen keuse gehad as om ook te skiet nie, en dit was dit. Die man is daar langs die pad dood."

Dit lyk of Alex terugkeer na die hede. Hy vryf Bo se kop en kyk emosieloos na Clay. "Een skelm minder op straat, nie waar nie?"

Wat hy sê, is waar, maar dit klink nie soos Alex nie en dit pas nie by die hartseer wat in sy stem gehoor kan word nie. Dit maak nie saak hoeveel skelms hy in hegtenis neem of doodskiet nie, dit sal nooit sy pa terugbring nie. Clay leun teen Alex se motor. "Jy het nie toestemming gehad om jou posisie te verlaat nie. Niemand het vir jou gesê om Bo na die ander kant van die parkeerarea te vat nie."

"Ek het 'n gevoel gehad." Daar is geen verskoning in Alex se oë nie. "Ek het iets sien beweeg in een van die motors, en ek wou reg wees."

"Wanneer dit by polisiewerk kom, gaan dit nie oor wat jy wil hê nie. Bevele moet gehoorsaam word." Clay sukkel om Alex tereg te wys. Dit is immers Alex se instink en gevoelens wat vandag 'n tragedie verhoed het.

"Ek het bevele gehoorsaam, Meneer." Daar is woede op Alex se gesig te bespeur. "Ek is uitgeroep om ondersteuning te bied, en dis wat ek en my kollega gedoen het."

Clay dink daaroor na. Alex het 'n punt beet. Daar is nie 'n spesifieke area aan hom toegeken nie, hy is net gevra om te kom help. Die feit dat hy sonder 'n spesifieke bevel van die een plek na die ander beweeg het, beteken nie werklik dat hy bevele verontagsaam het nie.

Drie SWAT-lede stap verby en een van hulle, Benson, wys met sy vinger na Alex. "Dit was die dapperste polisiewerk wat ek nog ooit gesien het, Brady. Welgedaan."

Alex sê dankie deur vir die man te knik en vestig weer sy aandag op Clay.

Nou kan Clay nie eintlik iets verder oor die situasie sê nie. As hy nou vir Alex wil straf, sal dit soos 'n grap lyk. Almal wat vandag hier was, sal met die SWAT-offisier se opmerking saamstem. Alex en Bo het wel op instink gereageer, maar hulle is vandag helde as gevolg van hulle optrede. Niks minder nie.

Clay vryf in sirkels oor sy slape en sug diep. “Jy ken die reëls. Jy het ’n sekere posisie ingeneem en vanweë die gevaar van die situasie moes jy toestemming of ’n bevel gekry het om te beweeg.”

“Ek het iets verdag in een van die geparkeerde motors gesien.” Alex ken die reëls. Hy ken dit goed genoeg om te weet dat as hy sê hy het iets verdag gesien, dit genoeg rede was vir hom om sy eerste posisie te verlaat. Aangesien hy soveel passie vir sy beroep het en so vasberade is, kom hy altyd die reëls na.

Clay trek sy oë op skrefies. “Sê vir my.” Hy aarsel, asof hy sy bes probeer om Alex se gedagtes te lees. “Het jy die verdagte se geweer gesien voordat jy begin skiet het?”

Alex staar vir ’n oomblik na Clay. Dan kyk hy af en die antwoord is voor die hand liggend. “Ek het ’n geweer gesien.” Hy kyk op. “Ja, Meneer.”

Clay wil nie verder hieroor praat nie en wil nie vir Alex in ’n hoek dwing sodat hulle albei vas is nie. Daar is geen twyfel dat Alex die reëls baie goed ken nie. Maar wanneer dit by polisiewerk kom, pas die reëls nie altyd so goed nie.

Hy gee ’n tree vorentoe en sit sy hand op Alex se skouer. “Jy maak my bekommerd, Brady. Jy maak ’n bietjie te veel staat op instink.” Hy dink aan die gesprek wat hulle nou die aand tydens ete gehad het, oor die ROA. Maar dit is nie nou die tyd om voorbeelde te noem nie.

“Ek sal sê dat Benson reg is in hierdie geval. Jy het as gevolg van instink gereageer en lewens gered.” Hy klop Alex op sy rug. “Insluitende myne. Jy het goed gedoen vandag, Brady. Baie goed.” Hy buk af en vryf Bo onder sy ken. “Jy ook, Bo. Goeie werk.”

Die hond draai sy kop na die een kant, maar verder bly hy doodstil langs Alex sit.

Alex praat met hom. “Lê, Bo.” Die hond kyk met lojale oë na Alex, dan strek hy sy voorpote uit en gaan lê op die teer, rustig.

“Jy het ’n wonderlike hond.” Clay werk al vir die afgelope drie jaar elke dag saam met honde-eenhede, al sedert hy bevorder is tot sersant van die SWAT-offisiere. Die verhouding tussen polisieman en hond was nog altyd baie sterk, maar die verhouding tussen Alex en Bo is iets uitsonderliks. “Hoe het hy geweet om die ander gewapende man aan te val, die een wat by die venster gestaan het?”

“My aandag was reeds op die man in die parkeerarea gevestig.” Alex vryf met sy hand oor Bo se rug. “Ons is ’n span.”

“Dit is waar.” Clay voel hartseer vir die jong polisieman. Hy is soos ’n eiland, afgesny van almal behalwe sy hond en sy werk. Clay tree agteruit. “Nou ja, ongeag hoe dit gebeur het, jy het vandag die polisie trots gemaak, Brady. En ek bedoel dit.” Hy aarsel. “Wees net versigtig.”

Alex kyk op na hom, trek sy oë op skrefies teen die middagson. Hy glimlag nie, en die leegheid in sy oë is steeds daar. “Dankie, Sersant. Ek waardeer dit. Ek sal volgende keer probeer om eers vir toestemming te vra.”

Dit is die regte antwoord, maar dit is ook al wat dit is. Clay verstaan. Dit wat Alex Brady dryf om misdaad te beveg is diep binne-in hom gewortel, en nie binne die reëls van die polisiemag nie. Hy klop Alex 'n laaste keer op die skouer. “Kry vir jou hond middagete, Brady. Sien jou weer by die polisiestatie.”

Clay handel sy papierwerk af en maak seker die speurders het alles wat nodig is. Dan, nadat al die ander SWAT-lede teruggestuur is polisiestatie toe, loop Clay na sy motor en verlaat die toneel. Op pad terug probeer hy vasstel wat hom pla oor vandag se gebeure, hoekom hy nie soos die res so in verwondering oor Alex se werk is nie.

Hy draai sy venster af en rus met sy arm op die deur, en laat die warm laatsomer briesie oor hom spoel. *Help my, Here ... Is ek te krities?*

'n Bybelvers flits deur sy gedagtes. Een wat hy verlede week in die vroeë oggendure gelees het, die tyd van die dag wat dit net hy en God is, wanneer hy gereedmaak vir nog 'n skof. Die teksvers kom uit Spreuke 14. “Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; agterna kom dit uit dat dit na die dood gelei het.”

Wat beteken die teksvers wanneer dit in verband gebring word met dit wat hy nou net gebid het? Clay vestig sy aandag op die pad en oorweeg die moontlikhede. Die Skrifgedeelte is vir seker van toepassing op misdadigers. Dit beskryf presies hoe hulle is. Maar hoe kan dit op hom of iemand soos Alex van toepassing wees?

Clay ry stadiger in 'n poging om langer te ry. Wanneer dit by Alex kom, vermy Clay dit om te praat oor hoe die man vrede kan vind – deur 'n rotsvaste geloof in Christus. Clay wag vir die regte geleentheid, by 'n braai wanneer Alex nie so gespanne lyk nie, of die oomblik wanneer dit op die een of ander manier reg voel om oor God te praat.

Maar wat as daardie oomblik nooit aanbreek nie? Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; maar op die ou einde lei dit na die dood, nie waar nie? Daarom is die teksvers vir seker van toepassing op die jong polisieman. Clay se vasberadenheid groei. Hy sal tyd moet maak om met Alex oor sy geloof te praat, selfs al voel dit of die tyd nie reg is nie. Selfs al is dit die ongemaklikste oomblik in Clay se hele lewe. Hy is so seker daarvan, hy voel sommer meer vasberade. Hy sal die volgende moontlike geleentheid aangryp.

Omdat dit wat Alex se hart vir hom sê reg lyk, sal hy selfs reg in eie hande neem. Alles wat Alex doen, sy dapperheid tydens 'n misdaadtoneel, hoe hy saam met sy hond werk, en die vasberade kyk in sy oë – alles het gesê dat Alex Brady net een regte manier ken. Hy is verantwoordelik vir die uitskakeling van enige misdaad waarop hy afkom sonder enigiemand se hulp. Nie eers God s'n nie.

Dit sal natuurlik nooit werk nie. Alex gaan binnekort nie meer op sy eie krag kan staatmaak nie, omdat geen mens al die boosheid om hom kan voorkom nie. Om met boosheid klaar te speel, is iets wat net die Here kan doen, en op sy tyd sal Hy wel daarmee afreken. Die

waarheid maak dit vir Clay duidelik, asof hy nou vir Alex Brady beter verstaan het. Terwyl hy terugry hoofkantoor toe, bid hy ywerig vir Alex. Dat die maniere wat vir die jong polisieman reg lyk hom tot aan die einde van sy eie krag sal neem, en dat wanneer hy daardie punt bereik, hy nie die dood sal vind nie, maar wel die lewe, die oorstloedige lewe wat God vir hom beplan het.

NINE

Jamie took CJ to preschool that morning and stayed to read to the children. She didn't know about the hostage situation or that Clay was on a SWAT call until that afternoon when she and CJ were driving home from the supermarket.

"Cookie, Mommy?" CJ patted the back of the passenger seat and strained against his belt so he could see her. "So hungry, Mommy!"

"We'll have a snack at home, okay buddy?" She turned and patted his chubby hand. "Mommy will slice up an apple for you."

Jamie turned up the radio and caught a news reporter mid-sentence. " — the situation on the hostage crisis earlier today. What we now know is that shots were fired at members of the LA County SWAT team. Two people are dead, and the two shooters are in custody. We'll update you as we gain more information on the — " Jamie slammed the radio off and grabbed her phone from her purse. *Not Clay, God ... please, not Clay.*

I am with you, Daughter ... I am here.

The blessed assurance was instant and all-consuming. She had lived in fear each day being married to Jake Bryan, worried sick that every call would be his last, refusing to believe in a God who would allow firefighters to die. Only after he was killed on September 11 did she finally make peace with God and realize the great ocean of strength and peace that came from putting all of her life in His hands. She could hardly pick up her old habits now.

"Mommy? What's 'a matter?"

"Not now, baby ..." she held her finger to her lips. "Give Mommy a minute."

She exhaled. *Thank You, God ... I hear You. I feel You here with me.* Her hands were shaking, but she felt stronger than before, ready for the news. Whatever the news. She was about to slide open her phone and call Clay when the ringer went off. A glance at the screen told her it was her husband, and relief rushed over her. She answered the call and held the phone to her

ear. “Clay, is that you?”

“Yes, baby.”

His voice worked its way through every cell in her body. “Thank You, God.” She was breathing fast. “I just heard the news.”

“This was the soonest I could call. I’m on my way back to the station.”

“What happened ... two people were shot?” She couldn’t will herself to ask if the victims were from the department.

“It was bad. We were all out there, Joe and his men too. None of the guys were shot, but it was close.” He breathed deeply. “A couple of crazed gunmen.”

“The news said a K9 deputy got one of them.”

“Alex. He and Bo were closest to the scene when the call came in.” He sounded worn out. “I’ll give you the details later, but Alex shot one of the guys just as he fired at our backs. At the same time, he released Bo to get the other one.”

Jamie wasn’t surprised. “Oh, Clay, I am so glad he was close by.”

“Definitely.” Clay hesitated, but only for a few seconds. “He saved lives, for sure.”

“Is he okay?”

“Physically, yes. I can’t vouch for his heart, though. He looked almost like he was in a trance after the shooting.” The frustration was audible in his tone. “He won’t let anyone inside, not even me.”

Jamie exhaled slowly, allowing her heartbeat to return to a more normal pace. “I’m just glad you’re okay. We can talk about Alex later.”

They spoke another few minutes, and Clay had to go. By then, Jamie was just pulling into the driveway, and as she cut the engine, she turned around and smiled. CJ had fallen asleep, and why not? He had no worries, no concerns. He was with his mommy, and whatever was wrong, she would take care of it. Jamie held the picture for a few seconds. It was exactly how God wanted her to feel, safe and secure in His loving care — no matter what happened.

She took CJ from his car seat, carried him upstairs, and placed him in his new big-boy bed. His favorite blanket was spread out near the wall, and Jamie tucked it in around him. He still took two-hour naps, and she was glad he’d fallen asleep. Jamie sat on the edge of his bed and gently brushed his white-

blond hair off his forehead.

Six months after she and Clay married, when she found out she was pregnant, Jamie came to grips with a very real possibility. The baby could look like his uncle Eric — distinctly different from Clay — the way babies sometimes favored one side of the family over another. And since Eric shared that uncanny resemblance with the husband Jamie had lost, he would look like Jake, like the son she and Jake never had. It wasn't something she dwelled on, and not once did she share that particular thought with Clay. As it turned out, she hadn't needed to worry about the issue. CJ was his daddy's son from the moment he was born — complete with Clay's blond hair and round face.

But he looked like Jamie too, enough that CJ and Sierra were clearly brother and sister. Sierra was an amazing big sister, playing with CJ every afternoon when he came toddling down the stairs after his nap. Sierra would take him out back and run through the sprinklers with him, letting him catch her and swinging him around until his laughter filled the yard.

Jamie smiled at him, then leaned over and kissed his cheek. For today, they were all well and whole. Sierra happy at school, CJ safe in his bed, and Clay alive after another dramatic day of police work. Nothing about tomorrow was promised to them; Jamie understood that. But as long as God gave them the gift of today, she would cherish it with all her heart.

She stood and left the room, quietly shutting the door behind her. As she did, she remembered Alex and what Clay had said about him, how he wouldn't let anyone inside. Jamie leaned against the stair railing, and slowly an idea formed. Alex's dad was FDNY, same as Jake. Jamie knew the last names of the firemen her husband had worked with, and Brady wasn't one of them. Odds were the two men rarely crossed paths, but the possibility remained. On the bigger calls, more than one station always responded. Maybe Jake had known Ben Brady.

It had been a year since she'd pulled Jake's old journal down from the top shelf in the hall closet. She lived with the wisdom Jake left behind, so she didn't need to look at the journal more often than that. Besides, Clay had suggested that looking at the book too often might not be healthy for her. Jake was gone, and this was her new life now. With him and CJ and Sierra. Jamie agreed wholeheartedly and she understood. Clay wasn't jealous of her dead husband. He only wanted her to be healthy about where she was now, where they were as a couple.

But this was different. The house was quiet, and Sierra wouldn't be home for another hour. She didn't want time alone with Jake's memory; she wanted to see if by some chance he had known Ben Brady. Jamie gave herself permission to check. She took soft steps toward the hall closet, opened the

door, and carefully got the book down.

Often when Jake wrote in his journal, he talked about incidents at work, firefighters he'd come across, and what his conversations with them had stirred in his own mind. There were, of course, a number of entries where Jake talked about his best friend, Larry Henning. The two had died together in the Twin Towers, that much they knew. Their helmets were found in the same section of rubble more than a month after 9/11.

But what about Ben Brady? Was there a chance Jake had ever met the man or written about him? Jamie took the journal to a bay window seat where the afternoon sun was streaming in just so. Despite the warm afternoon, the news about the gunmen had left her cold inside. She took the seat, and warmth radiated through the window and into the muscles along her back.

She put the journal on her lap and opened the first page. Reading one entry after another would get her nowhere today, and it would leave her in tears. The way it always did when she allowed herself to go back to her life before September 11. No, this would be more of a scanning, an exercise of her left brain. In case the name Ben Brady was somewhere in the pages of Jake's extensive writings.

The pages weren't exactly ancient, but they had a brittle feel to them now. Jamie took great care as she opened the book and allowed herself to read the first page.

Jake Bryan, the inscription read. *A journal for notes and observations, a trail so that someday my Jamie might look back and read, and that by doing so she might* "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name." — *John 20:31*.

Jamie read the words a second time. It was always strange and uncanny what Jake had written, as if he had somehow known he wasn't going to survive his days with the FDNY, and more, that the words in his journal, the words etched into the borders of his beloved Bible, might one day lead Jamie to the faith he had always prayed she would find. Which was exactly what had happened.

The slightest remorse seized Jamie, and once more she wished she'd found that faith while Jake was still alive. But this way, her change of heart would give them one more reason to celebrate someday when they were reunited in heaven. She steadied herself and turned the page. In keeping with her determination, she resisted the temptation to read each entry. Instead, she ran her finger down the page, searching for just one word.

Brady.

She was nearly fifty pages into the book and unaware of how much time had passed when suddenly the name practically jumped out at her. She gasped and let her eyes find the beginning of the entry. It was almost impossible to think Jake had known him, or that the name truly represented Alex's father. But there it was, right in front of her. The entry started on the previous page and was dated a month before 9/11.

Sometimes I come across someone in the department who personifies courage and commitment, the sort of firefighter people talk about with words like bravery and loyalty, strength and honor. That's the way I feel about my friend Ben Brady from the station a few blocks from mine. We worked a call together yesterday, and I found myself watching him, the way he took charge of the blaze and set an example for the men from his firehouse. Ben and I know each other. We've talked a number of times. But yesterday we talked on a deeper level, about what drives us.

Jamie could hardly believe what she was reading. Not only had Jake known Alex's father, but also he knew him well and even looked up to him. She kept reading, drinking in every word.

I wasn't surprised when he told me he was a Christian. "I take God with me on every call," he said. I liked that. It's the way I feel, the way I live. But I guess I never heard it put that way before. He said something else too. He told me he knows he can only do so much to keep the city of New York safe from fires. "When you live with constant danger," he told me, "you have to remember John 16:33." He winked at me. "That's what keeps me sane. John 16:33." I was familiar with the verse, so I understood. Jesus used that part of Scripture to tell his friends a simple, profound message: "... in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

He also told me he hoped one day his son would embrace the verse. "So far, my family has had very little trouble. Life is good, love is sweet, and time seems like it'll last forever." His eyes held a bittersweet shine. "We all know that isn't true. Especially working for the FDNY."

His words stayed with me all day and even now, as I write, I can hear them in my heart. He's right. Today is like that for me and Jamie and Sierra. Life is good, love is sweet, and time seems like it'll last forever. But it won't. It never does. And so we stay strong in the hope of John 16:33 ... because in the end, Christ has overcome the world. That's what I have to tell myself every now and then.

Jamie let the final words of his entry fill her, consume her until she could barely breathe. *Every now and then*. The way they all needed the words from John 16:33.

And what about the connection with Ben Brady? Jamie had known the young K9 deputy for a year, known all that time that his firefighter father had died in the collapse of the Twin Towers. But never had she even considered looking in Jake's journal, checking to see if, by some strange act of God, the two men might've known each other. Even then, she never could've imagined a find like this one — an entire entry about Jake's admiration for Ben Brady and his thoughts on Ben's wisdom.

An urgency came over her, the same urgency she'd felt each day when she reported for her volunteer work at St. Paul's Chapel. In her years in that position, God had used her to help hundreds of men and women find a way out from under their anger and grief. With God giving her wisdom, she had helped people learn to live again. She was finished with her days at St. Paul's, but now here was Alex Brady. A part of their everyday lives. Or at least a part of Clay's.

She read the journal entry two more times, and goose bumps flashed across the length of her arms and legs. Once more, God had provided her with the wisdom she'd need to help someone find peace after the pain of 9/11. The journal entry would give Alex a window to his father that he'd probably never had before. And maybe in the process it would slice through the barriers that stood between Alex and the rest of the world. Maybe the news would whittle away the walls and allow him to find the life and love in Christ that had clearly marked his father's every breath. Yes, that's what God wanted her to do with this information. She could hardly wait to show Clay the journal entry. Certainly he would agree with her, that God had brought Alex into their lives for this exact moment, for this specific reason.

Now she only had to pray for the right timing.

She truly intended to put the journal away. After reading through the entry about Ben Brady the third time, she was about to close the cover when another line caught her attention, something about Sierra and how their daughter had worked her way so quickly into his heart. Jamie settled in over the page and clung to every word. One entry led to another, as she did what she hadn't planned to do this afternoon.

Made her way back to her old life.

When the front door opened, she barely heard it, caught up in something Jake had written about one of their weekend trips to the beach and how it felt to ride their WaveRunner across the harbor with Jamie at the controls, pushing

the machine to its limit, and how —

“Jamie?”

She straightened, lifting her eyes to the sound of Clay’s voice. Something wet was rolling down her cheeks, and her eyes felt thick and heavy. She was crying, and she hadn’t even known it. “Clay.” She closed the journal and set it on the window seat beside her. “You’re home early.”

“Captain told us to come home and get some rest.” He wasn’t looking at her, but at the journal. Slowly he came closer, the hurt in his eyes so raw the pain radiated from him. He stopped and turned to her. “What’re you doing?”

Jamie wiped at the wetness beneath her eyes and sniffed. “It’s not like it looks.” She didn’t have to defend herself, but Clay had a right to wonder. She stood and went to him. “I wondered if maybe Jake knew Ben Brady, you know, if maybe he might’ve written about him in his journal.” She slipped her hands into the back pockets of her black jeans.

“Thousands of men work for the FDNY,” his tone was kind, but wounded. “Don’t use that as an excuse to — “

“I found something.” She turned back to the window seat and brought the journal to him. She flipped through the pages until she found the right one. “I didn’t believe it either, but it’s there. Read it.”

Clay released a heavy breath, but then he took the book in his hands and read the entry. His expression changed, and when he finally spoke to her, a sense of wonder filled his voice. “That’s amazing.” He closed the journal and handed it back to her. “I can’t believe you would even think to look.”

“God must’ve put the idea on my heart.” Her cheeks were nearly dry now. “When the time’s right, I want to share this with Alex. This could turn things around for him.”

A skeptical look flashed across Clay’s face. He framed Jamie’s face with his hands and ran his thumbs lightly beneath her eyes, wiping away what remained of her tears. “Seeing you like that, sitting here crying, reading his journal,” his voice was not much more than a whisper. “It breaks my heart, Jamie. It makes me feel ...” he looked away from her, at the fraction of sky through the same window where she’d been sitting. “Like I’ll never be more than second-best.”

In the nearly four years they’d been married, Clay had only brought up this terrible feeling of his one other time — when he’d found her outside their house, lost in thought on what would’ve been Jake’s birthday. What she’d told him then still applied today. She tried to find the right words to express her

heart. “Clay,” she waited until she had his complete attention again, “Jake was a part of my life for twenty years.” Her tone was kind, begging him to understand. “You can’t ask me to walk away from that.”

He looked like he might say something in response, or try to debate her on her decision to spend the afternoon reading Jake’s journal. But instead he took the journal from her and set it carefully on the floor beside them. Then he pulled her close and smoothed his hand along the back of her head. “I’m sorry. It’s hard for me.”

She held onto him, gripping his strong body to her own as fresh tears filled her eyes. “I don’t know what to say, baby. It’s hard for me too.”

From the far end of the house they heard the happy voice of Sierra, home from school. “Mom? Dad? I aced my math test!”

Jamie pulled back and wiped her eyes again. “Time got away from me. That’s all.” She reached down, picked up Jake’s journal, and took a few steps toward the stairs. “I’m sorry, Clay. Really.”

He held her eyes a few seconds more, nodded, and turned to intercept Sierra. “All right! Did you bring it home?”

“Yeah, it’s in my backpack.”

Jamie realized what Clay had done. By going to meet Sierra, he’d given her unspoken permission to collect herself, to return the journal and find her way back to the here and now, and she loved him for it. But even as she hurried up the stairs and set the book back on the top shelf of the hall closet, even as she ran a washcloth over her face and pulled a brush through her dark hair, she had to ask herself if this wasn’t what Eric had warned her about. That by taking up the cause of Alex Brady, she might wind up lost somewhere back in yesterday — a place she had a hard enough time leaving four years ago. At the time, she’d thought little of his warning, but now she didn’t have to ask if the possibility existed.

The tearstains on her cheek told her all she needed to know.

Hoofstuk 9

Jamie vat die oggend vir CJ skool toe en bly daar om vir die kinders te lees. Sy weet nie van die gyselaarsdrama of dat Clay se SWAT-span uitgeroep is nie tot die middag toe sy en CJ van die supermark af huis toe ry.

“Koekie, Mamma?” CJ slaan teen die agterkant van die passasiersitplek en sy lyfie rem teen die sitplekgordel sodat hy haar kan sien. “Ek is honger,

Mamma!”

“Ons sal iets by die huis gaan eet, reg so, my seun?” Sy draai effens en vryf sy pofferige handjie. “Mamma sal vir jou ’n appel sny.”

Jamie draai die radio harder en sy hoor net die helfte van ’n nuusberig. “... die gyselaarsdrama vroeër vandag. Die jongste inligting is dat skote gevuur is na lede van die Los Angeles SWAT-span. Twee mense is dood en die twee gewapende mans is in hegtenis geneem. Ons sal u op hoogte hou sodra ons meer inligting het oor die ...” Jamie skakel die radio dadelik af en gryp haar selfoon uit haar handsak. *Net nie Clay nie, Here ... asseblief, nie Clay nie.*

Ek is by jou ... Ek is hier.

Die goddelike versekering is onmiddellik daar en omring haar. Sy het elke dag in vrees geleef toe sy met Jake Bryan getroud was, haar siek bekommer dat elke keer wanneer hy uitgeroep word dit dalk sy laaste keer sal wees, en sy het geweier om in ’n God te glo wat toelaat dat brandweermanne sterf. Eers nadat hy op 11 September dood is, het sy uiteindelik vrede gemaak met God en besef hoe groot die krag en vrede is wat sy ervaar wanneer sy haar hele lewe in sy hande plaas. Sy kan tog nie nou met haar ou gewoontes begin nie.

“Mamma? Wat’s fout?”

“Nie nou nie, my skat ...” Sy hou haar vinger voor haar mond. “Gee vir Mamma net ’n oomblik.”

Sy asem uit. *Dankie, Here ... Ek hoor U. Ek voel u teenwoordigheid hier by my.* Haar hande bewe, maar sy voel sterker, gereed vir die nuus. Wat dit ook al is. Sy is op die punt om haar selfoon oop te skuif en vir Clay te bel, toe dit begin lui. Sy kyk na die skerm en dit wys dit is haar man, en verligting spoel oor haar. Sy antwoord die selfoon en bring dit na haar oor toe. “Clay, is dit jy?”

“Ja, my lief.”

Sy stem weerklink deur haar hele lyf. “Dankie, Here.” Sy haal vlak asem. “Ek het nou net die nuus gehoor.”

“Ek kon nie vroeër bel nie. Ek is op pad polisiestasie toe.”

“Wat het gebeur ... twee mense is geskiet?” Sy kry haarself nie sover om te vra of die slagoffers polisiemanne is nie.

“Dit was baie erg. Ons almal was daar, Joe en sy manne ook. Nie een van die manne is geskiet nie, maar dit was amper.” Hy haal diep asem. “Dit was twee mal gewapende mans.”

“Die nuus het gesê ’n polisieman van die honde-eenheid het een van hulle geskiet.”

“Alex. Hy en Bo was die naaste aan die toneel toe ons uitgeroep is.” Hy klink moeg. “Ek sal later vir jou al die besonderhede vertel, maar Alex het een van die mans geskiet die oomblik toe hy op ons, met ons rûe na hom, begin skiet het. Op daardie oomblik het hy ook vir Bo laat los om die ander man te kry.”

Jamie is nie verras nie. “Ag, Clay, ek is so bly hy was naby.”

“Ja.” Clay aarsel, maar net vir ’n paar sekondes. “Hy het definitief lewens gered.”

“Is hy oukei?”

“Fisiek, ja. Ek kan egter nie dieselfde sê wat sy hart betref nie. Dit het amper gelyk of hy in ’n beswyming is ná die skietery.” Sy kan die frustrasie in sy stem hoor. “Hy wil niemand in sy vertroue neem nie, nie eers vir my nie.”

Jamie asem stadig uit en laat haar hartklop toe om weer na ’n normale spoed toe terug te keer. “Ek is net bly jy leef nog. Ons kan later oor Alex praat.”

Hulle praat vir nog ’n paar minute en toe moet Clay gaan. Op daardie oomblik ry Jamie by hulle oprit in en toe sy die motor afsluit, draai sy om en glimlag. CJ het aan die slaap geraak, en hoekom nie? Hy het geen bekommernisse nie en is oor niks besorg nie. Hy is saam met sy mamma en as daar iets verkeerd gaan, sal sy dit hanteer. Jamie dink vir ’n oomblik daaroor na. Dit is presies hoe God wil hê sy moet voel, veilig, beskerm deur sy liefdevolle omgee – maak nie saak wat gebeur nie.

Sy tel CJ uit sy motorstoeltjie, dra hom boontoe en sit hom in sy nuwe groot-seuntjie-bed. Sy gunsteling kombers is naby die muur oopgegooi en Jamie vou dit om hom. Hy slaap steeds so twee uur op ’n slag en sy is bly hy het aan die slaap geraak. Jamie sit op die rand van sy bed en vryf die blonde hare op sy voorkop saggies weg.

Ses maande nadat sy en Clay getroud is, toe sy uitvind sy ver wag, het Jamie van ’n werklikheid bewus geword. Die baba kon soos sy oom Eric lyk – heeltemal anders as Clay – soos babas soms meer na die een kant van ’n familie as die ander lyk. En aangesien Eric daardie onheilspellende ooreenkoms gedeel het met die man wat Jamie verloor het, sou hy soos Jake lyk, soos die seun wat sy en Jake nooit gehad het nie. Dit was nie iets waaraan sy die hele tyd gedink het nie, en nie een keer het sy hierdie spesifieke gedagte met Clay gedeel nie. En op die ou einde hoef sy haar glad nie daaroor te bekommer het nie. CJ was sy pa se seun van die oomblik dat hy gebore is – met Clay se blonde hare en ronde gesig.

Maar hy lyk ook soos Jamie, soveel so dat CJ en Sierra duidelik broer en suster is. Sierra is ’n ongelooflike ousus en speel elke middag met CJ wanneer hy ná sy slapie met die trap af kom. Sierra vat hom dan uit na agter en hardloop saam met hom deur die sproeiers, laat hom toe om haar te vang en swaai hom in die rondte totdat sy lag die erf vul.

Jamie glimlag terwyl sy vir hom kyk, en leun dan vorentoe om hom op sy wang te soen. Vandag gaan dit goed met hulle almal en is hulle gesond. Sierra is gelukkig by die skool, CJ is veilig in sy bed en Clay leef ná nog ’n dramatiese dag as polisieman. Hulle is nie seker oor môre nie; Jamie verstaan dit. Maar solank God vandag vir hulle as geskenk gee, sal sy dit met haar hele hart koester.

Sy staan op en loop uit die kamer, maak die deur saggies agter haar toe. Toe sy die deur toetrek, dink sy aan Alex en wat Clay oor hom gesê het, hoe hy niemand in sy vertroue neem nie. Jamie leun teen die trapreling en stadig neem ’n idee vorm aan. Alex se pa was ook ’n brandweerman, net soos Jake. Jamie ken die vanne van die brandweermanne wat saam met haar man gewerk

het, en Brady is nie een van hulle nie. Die kans dat die twee mans se paaië gekruis het, is skraal, maar die moontlikheid is steeds daar. Wanneer hulle na groter brande uitgeroep word, reageer meer as een brandweerstasie altyd. Miskien het Jake vir Ben Brady geken.

Dit is 'n jaar gelede sedert sy Jake se ou joernaal uit die gangkas se boonste rak gehaal het. Sy leef nou met die wysheid wat Jake agtergelaat het; daarom hoef sy nie meer gereeld na die joernaal te kyk nie. Clay het in elk geval ook gesê dat dit dalk vir haar ongesond kan wees om te gereeld daarna te kyk. Jake is weg en hierdie is nou haar nuwe lewe. Saam met hom en CJ en Sierra. Jamie stem saam en sy verstaan. Clay is nie jaloers op haar oorlede man nie. Hy wil net hê sy moet helder dink oor waar sy haarself nou bevind, oor hulle lewe saam.

Maar in hierdie geval is dit anders. Die huis is stil en Sierra sal eers oor 'n uur by die huis wees. Sy wil nie alleentyd saam met die herinnering aan Jake deurbring nie; sy wil sien of hy dalk vir Ben Brady geken het. Jamie loop saggies na die gangkas, maak die deur oop en haal die boek versigtig uit.

Wanneer Jake in sy joernaal geskryf het, het hy dikwels oor insidente by die werk geskryf, brandweermanne wat hy ontmoet het, en wat gesprekke met hulle in sy gedagtes laat posvat het. Daar is natuurlik ook 'n aantal inskrywings oor Jake se beste vriend, Larry Henning. Vandag is dit bekend dat hulle saam in die Twin Towers gesterf het. Hulle kopskerms is meer as 'n maand ná 11 September in dieselfde seksie puin gevind.

Maar wat van Ben Brady? Is daar 'n moontlikheid dat Jake ooit die man ontmoet het of oor hom geskryf het? Jamie gaan sit met die joernaal langs 'n venster waar die son instroom. Ten spyte van die warm middag het die nuus oor die gewapende mans haar binne-in koud gelaat. Waar sy sit, skyn die son deur die venster tot in haar rugspiere.

Sy sit die joernaal op haar skoot neer en blaai na die eerste bladsy. Om die een inskrywing ná die ander te lees, sal haar vandag niks help nie en haar net in trane laat uitbars. Soos dit altyd gebeur wanneer sy haarself toelaat om aan haar lewe voor 11 September te dink. Nee, sy sal haar oë daaroor laat gly, haar linkerbrein gebruik. Vir ingeval die naam Ben Brady iewers op die blaaie van Jake se omvangryke joernaal geskryf staan.

Die bladsy is nie baie oud nie, maar hulle voel tog effens bros. Jamie is versigtig toe sy die boek oopmaak en die eerste bladsy begin lees.

Daar staan geskryf: *Jake Bryan. 'n Joernaal vir notas en waarnemings wat soos 'n spoor nagelaat word sodat my Jamie dalk eendag kan terugkyk en lees, en dan deur dit te doen te "glo dat Jesus die Messias is, die Seun van God, en sodat julle deur aan te hou glo, die lewe kan hê in sy Naam"* (Joh. 20:31).

Jamie lees die woorde 'n tweede keer. Wat Jake geskryf het, is altyd vir haar vreemd en onheilspellend. Asof hy op die een of ander manier geweet het hy gaan nie as brandweerman oorleef nie, en dat die woorde in sy joernaal, die woorde wat in die kantlyn van sy geliefde Bybel geskryf staan, eendag vir

Jamie sou lei na die geloof wat hy altyd gehoop het sy vind. Wat presies is wat gebeur het.

Jamie voel hoe 'n bietjie berou van haar beslag neem, en weereens wens sy dat sy daardie geloof gevind het toe Jake nog geleef het. Maar dinge het anders uitgewerk en haar nuwe lewe sal vir hulle nog 'n rede wees om fees te vier eendag wanneer hulle mekaar weer in die hemel ontmoet. Sy sit regop en blaai na die tweede bladsy. Sy is vasberade en weerstaan die versoeking om elke inskrywing te lees. In plaas daarvan gebruik sy haar vinger om vinnig oor die bladsy te beweeg en net vir een woord te soek.

Brady.

Sy is amper op bladsy vyftig, onbewus van hoe die tyd gevlieg het, toe die naam skielik duidelik voor haar staan. Sy snak na haar asem en gaan na die begin van die inskrywing. Dit is byna onmoontlik om te dink dat Jake hom geken het, of dat die naam werklik Alex se pa verteenwoordig. Maar daar is dit, reg voor haar. Die inskrywing begin op die vorige bladsy en die datum is 'n maand voor 11 September.

Soms loop ek iemand by die brandweer raak wat 'n toonbeeld van dapperheid en toewyding is, die soort brandweerman waaroor mense praat en met woorde soos “dapper” en “lojaal”, “krag” en “aansien” beskryf. Dit is hoe ek oor my vriend Ben Brady voel, wat by 'n brandweerstasie 'n paar blokke van myne werk. Ons is gister saam uitgeroep en ek het skielik stilgestaan en na hom gekyk, hoe hy beheer geneem het oor die vuur en 'n voorbeeld gestel het vir die manne van sy brandweerstasie. Ek en Ben ken mekaar. Ons het al 'n paar keer gepraat. Maar gister het ons oor dieper dinge met mekaar gepraat, oor wat die dryfkrag agter ons is.

Jamie kan haar oë amper nie glo nie. Jake het nie net Alex se pa geken nie, maar hy het hom goed geken en hom as rolmodel beskou. Sy lees verder, neem elke woord in.

Dit het my nie verras toe ek hoor hy is 'n Christen nie. “Ek vat God elke keer saam met my wanneer ons uitgeroep word,” het hy gesê. Ek hou daarvan. Dit is ook hoe ek voel, hoe ek leef. Maar ek veronderstel ek het nog nooit gehoor dat iemand dit so stel nie. Hy het ook iets anders gesê. Hy het vir my gesê hy weet hy kan net soveel doen om New York teen brande te beskerm. “Wanneer jy konstant met gevaar saamleef, moet jy Johannes 16:33 onthou,” het hy gesê. Hy het vir my geknipoo. “Hierdie teksvers help my om nie my varkies te verloor nie.” Ek ken die vers; daarom het ek verstaan. Jesus het die Skrifgedeelte gebruik om vir sy vriende 'n eenvoudige, diepgrondige boodskap oor te dra: “Ek sê hierdie dinge vir julle sodat julle in My rus en vrede kan vind. In hierdie wêreld sal julle swaarkry beleef, maar skep moed: Ek het die wêreld reeds oorwin.”

Hy het ook vir my gesê hy hoop sy seun aanvaar ook eendag hierdie vers.

“My gesin het sover maar min swaarkry beleef. Die lewe is goed, die liefde wonderlik, en dit lyk of tyd vir ewig sal aanhou.” Daar was ’n bittersoet glans in sy oë. “Ons almal weet dit is nie waar nie. Veral as jy vir die brandweer werk.”

Sy woorde het die hele dag by my gebly en selfs nou, terwyl ek skryf, weerklink dit in my hart. Hy is reg. Dit is hoe vandag vir my en Jamie en Sierra voel. Die lewe is goed, die liefde wonderlik, en dit lyk of tyd vir ewig sal aanhou. Maar dit gaan nie. Dit is van korte duur. Dus bly ons sterk deur aan Johannes 16:33 vas te hou ... want God het die wêreld reeds oorwin. Ek moet myself so nou en dan daaraan herinner.

Jamie laat die laaste woorde van sy inskrywing deur haar spoel, haar wese oorneem totdat sy skaars kan asemhaal. *So nou en dan.* Hulle almal het die woorde van Johannes 16:33 so nou en dan nodig.

En wat van die verbintenis met Ben Brady? Jamie ken die jong polisieman van die honde-eenheid nou al vir ’n jaar, en het die hele tyd geweet sy pa, ’n brandweerman, is dood met die ineenstorting van die Twin Towers. Maar nooit het sy daaraan gedink om Jake se joernaal na te gaan en te kyk of die twee mans mekaar miskien geken het nie deur die vreemde werking van God. Sy sou nooit kon raai dat sy so iets sou vind nie – ’n hele inskrywing van Jake waarin hy Ben Brady bewonder en sê wat hy van sy wysheid dink.

Skielik voel sy gedryf, dieselfde gevoel wat sy elke dag ervaar het wanneer sy vir werk opgedaag het by St. Paul’s Chapel. Gedurende die tyd wat sy daar gewerk het, het God haar gebruik om honderde mans en vroue te help om hulle woede en hartseer agter te laat. Met God se wysheid het sy mense geleer om weer te leef. Haar dae by St. Paul’s is verby, maar hier was Alex Brady nou. Deel van hulle elkedagse lewe. Of ten minste deel van Clay s’n.

Sy lees die joernaalinskrywing nog twee keer deur en hoendervleis slaan oor haar lyf uit. God het haar weereens die nodige wysheid gegee om iemand te help om vrede te vind ná die pyn van 11 September. Die joernaalinskrywing sal vir Alex ’n kykie in sy pa se lewe gee wat hy waarskynlik nooit voorheen gehad het nie. En miskien sal dit in die proses die mure afbreek wat tussen Alex en die res van die wêreld staan. Miskien sal die nuus die mure inmekaar laat stort en hom toelaat om die lewe en liefde in Christus te vind wat heel duidelik deel van sy pa se bestaan was. Ja, dit is wat God wil hê sy met hierdie inligting moet doen. Sy kan nie wag om die joernaalinskrywing vir Clay te wys nie. Hy sal sekerlik met haar saamstem dat God Alex deel van hulle lewens gemaak het vir hierdie presiese oomblik, om hierdie spesifieke rede.

Nou moet sy net bid vir die regte tydsberekening.

Nou kan sy maar die joernaal bêre. Nadat sy die inskrywing oor Ben Brady vir die derde keer gelees het en die boek wil toemaak, trek nog ’n sin haar aandag. Iets oor Sierra en hoe hul dogter so vinnig in sy hart gekruip het. Jamie begin die bladsy lees en hou vas aan elke woord. Die een inskrywing lei

tot 'n ander en dit lei tot iets wat sy nie van plan was om vanmiddag te doen nie.

Om terug te gaan in haar verlede.

Toe die voordeur oopgaan, hoor sy dit skaars, gefassineer deur iets wat Jake geskryf het oor een van hul naweekuitstappies na die strand, en hoe dit gevoel het om met hulle waterponie in die hawe te ry met Jamie wat bestuur, so vinnig as wat sy kan, en hoe ...

“Jamie?”

Sy sit regop en kyk op toe sy Clay se stem hoor. Iets nats rol oor haar wang en haar oë voel dik en swaar. Sy huil en sy het dit nie eers besef nie. “Clay.” Sy maak die joernaal toe en sit dit langs haar neer. “Jy is vroeg by die huis.”

“Die kaptein het gesê ons moet huis toe gaan en gaan rus.” Hy kyk nie na haar nie, maar na die joernaal. Hy kom stadig nader, die seer in sy oë is so rou dat die pyn uit hom straal. Hy gaan staan en draai na haar toe. “Wat doen jy?”

Jamie vee die trane uit haar oë en snuif. “Dit is nie hoe dit lyk nie.” Sy hoef haarself nie te verdedig nie, maar Clay het die reg om te wonder. Sy staan op en loop na hom toe. “Ek het gewonder of Jake nie miskien vir Ben Brady geken het nie, of hy nie miskien oor hom in sy joernaal geskryf het nie.” Sy steek haar hande in die agtersakke van haar swart denim.

“Duisende mense werk vir die brandweer in New York,” sy stemtoon is vriendelik, maar tog seergemaak. “Moenie daardie verskoning gebruik om ...”

“Ek het iets gekry.” Sy draai terug na die venster en loop met die joernaal na hom toe. Sy blaai daardeur totdat sy die regte bladsy kry. “Ek kon dit ook nie glo nie, maar hier is dit. Lees dit.”

Clay blaas sy asem uit, maar dan vat hy die boek by haar en lees die inskrywing. Sy gesigsuitdrukking verander en toe hy uiteindelik met haar praat, is sy stem gevul met verwondering. “Dit is ongelooflik.” Hy maak die joernaal toe en gee dit vir haar. “Ek kan nie glo jy het daaraan gedink om te kyk nie.”

“God moes dit op my hart gedruk het.” Sy huil nie meer nie. “Wanneer die tyd reg is, wil ek dit met Alex deel. Dit kan sy lewe verander.”

Daar is 'n skeptiese uitdrukking op Clay se gesig. Hy vat Jamie se gesig in sy hande en vee saggies met sy duime onder haar oë, vee dit wat van die trane oorgebly het af. “As ek jou so sien, hier waar jy sit en huil terwyl jy sy joernaal lees,” fluister hy. “Dit breek my hart, Jamie. Dit laat my voel asof ...” Hy kyk weg, kyk deur die venster waar sy gesit het na die stukkie lug. “Asof ek nooit meer as tweede beste sal wees nie.”

Tydens die vier jaar wat hulle getroud is, het Clay nog net een keer oor hierdie aaklige gevoel van hom gepraat – toe hy haar buite hul huis gekry het, diep in gedagte, op die dag toe dit Jake se verjaarsdag sou wees. Wat sy toe vir hom gesê het, is vandag steeds waar. Sy soek na die regte woorde om haar gevoelens uit te druk. “Clay,” sy wag totdat sy weer sy volle aandag het, “Jake was vir twintig jaar deel van my lewe.” Haar stemtoon is vriendelik, en

smeek hom om te verstaan. “Jy kan my nie vra om dit heeltemal te vergeet nie.”

Dit lyk of hy iets in reaksie daarop wil sê, of wil probeer debatteer oor haar keuse om vanmiddag deur Jake se joernaal te lees. Maar in plaas daarvan vat hy die joernaal by haar en sit dit versigtig langs hulle op die grond neer. Dan trek hy haar nader en vryf met sy hand oor die agterkant van haar kop. “Ek is jammer. Dis vir my moeilik.”

Sy hou hom vas, trek sy sterk lyf teenaan hare toe nuwe trane in haar oë opwel. “Ek weet nie wat om te sê nie, my lief. Dit is vir my ook moeilik.”

Hulle hoor Sierra se opgewonde stem in die verste deel van die huis, terug van die skool af. “Ma? Pa? Ek het ’n onderskeiding vir my wiskundetoets gekry!”

Jamie tree terug en vee weer oor haar oë. “Die tyd het weggehardloop met my. Dis al.” Sy tel Jake se joernaal van die grond af op, en loop na die trap toe. “Ek is jammer, Clay. Regtig.”

Hy kyk vir nog ’n paar sekondes na haar, knik, en draai om om na Sierra toe te gaan. “Baie mooi! Het jy dit huis toe gebring?”

“Ja, dit is in my tas.”

Jamie besef wat Clay doen. Deur na Sierra toe te gaan gee hy vir haar die kans om haarself reg te ruk, om die joernaal te bêre en terug te keer na die hier en nou. Dis hieroor dat sy hom so liefhet. Maar toe sy probeer om vinnig met die trap op te hardloop en die boek op die boonste rak van die gangkas te bêre, en toe sy met die waslap oor haar gesig vee en die borsel deur haar donker hare trek, kan sy nie help om haarself af te vra of dit nie is waaroor Eric haar gewaarsku het nie. Deur vir Alex Brady te help, gaan sy dalk êrens in die verlede verdwaal – ’n plek wat sy vier jaar gelede moeilik verlaat het. Toe het sy nie baie gedink van die waarskuwing nie, maar nou hoef sy nie meer te vra of dit moontlik is nie.

Die trane oor haar wange vertel haar alles wat sy moet weet.

TEN

The memories of Holly had hung around longer than usual, through the night and waiting there in the wings while Alex had shown up on the hostage scene and quickly taken matters into his own hands. Poor Clay hadn't known what to make of him, sitting in his squad car with Bo on the ground beside him, barely saying more than a few words about the incident.

What was he supposed to say? He hadn't liked seeing the bad guy lying on the ground bleeding out, but someone had to stop him. This was what he'd committed his life to doing, getting criminals off the street, making his father proud. Doing his part to keep families from being ripped apart the way his had been.

Sure, he'd acted on instinct, taking Bo and slipping toward the back of the parking lot. But he'd had a feeling about the parked cars, and as he made his way closer he was sure he saw someone move inside the middle one. By the time the second gunman sprang from the car shooting his gun, Alex was ready.

The way he'd been ready since the moment he was sworn in as a Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy.

Clay had thought Alex was quiet because of the shooting, but that was only partly it. The shooting was a necessary act, proving he had been right where he was supposed to be. He felt bad about taking the guy down, but what sort of crazy person would dare leap from a hiding place and start shooting at the backs of SWAT team officers? Crazy guy like that wouldn't think twice about killing again, whenever the system let him out.

The distance in his eyes had been about more than the shooting. The reason he didn't have much to say was because of Holly's memory, because the act of taking out the criminal was the very reason he'd given her up. Normally he could push her memory away, tuck it safely back into a cold, airless vault in his heart where it would never see the light of day. But this time her memory hung around, her voice talking to him as he drove into work that morning, the feel of her hand in his so strong she might as well have been sitting beside

him as he went out on patrol. The only time he didn't catch himself thinking about her was during the call, while he sped to the scene to provide backup, and while he took care of the bad guys. The minute the danger had passed, she was back again, her clear blue eyes burning a painful hole in his heart.

Now it was noon Wednesday, and he was heading to work again. His sergeant had told him maybe this wasn't a good day for overtime, what with the drama from the day before. But Alex wanted as much overtime as he could get. Every hour on the job helped push memories of the past a little further away, back where they belonged.

He parked his squad car, climbed out, and let Bo free from the backseat. They were into September, and the Santa Ana winds were picking up. He searched the mountains that ringed the area looking for signs of a brushfire. There were none. "Come on, Bo. Let's get it." Together they walked in, and from the moment he entered the meeting room he knew something had happened. Guys were talking in whispers, getting their coffee, and finding their folding chairs without the usual loud joking and relentless ribbing.

"Somebody wanna tell me what's going on?" Alex stopped, and Bo immediately heeled at his side. Alex looked at the faces of the guys around him. "Anyone?"

Clay rounded the corner and stopped. He was the first guy to make eye contact with him since he'd walked through the door. "Brady ... we need to see you in the office."

Alex racked his brain, trying to imagine what might've happened to cause this sort of reaction among the special forces teams. Had someone seen him parked outside the REA headquarters? Was his job on the line for breaking department protocol?

Inside the office, Clay and Joe leaned against one wall, and behind an oversized desk sat three of the department's highest-ranking brass. Clay shut the door behind them, and Alex remained standing. One at a time, he looked at the eyes of the men in charge. He waited until one of them spoke.

"Brady, we have bad news." One of the department's captains pressed his lips together.

Was it about his mother? He talked to her every few weeks, but never for very long. Her new husband had money, and the two of them were always going out or heading to some fundraiser or benefit dinner. She was an escrow officer now, busy with her own life. She understood how he felt about his job, how it was everything to him. But now had something happened to her too? His thoughts raced through his mind at breakneck speed.

“The suspect you shot at yesterday’s standoff?” the captain frowned, his voice deeply serious. “He died this morning. We just got word.”

Alex felt the loss of life instinctively, in a part of his soul where death of any kind would always hurt, always chafe against the ideal. He cleared his throat and stood a little straighter. “I’m sorry to hear that, sir.”

“This means an investigation, of course. Purely standard procedure.” The commander in the group folded his arms across his chest. “And for you, Brady, it means two weeks’ leave.” Alex felt like he’d been kicked in the gut. “Two weeks, sir?”

“Two weeks to clear your head, man.” Joe slid one foot up the wall and leaned on his knee. “It’s a good thing, Brady. Believe me.”

“We’ll keep you posted throughout the investigation. It’s pretty open-shut. We’ll let you know when the final results are put into a report.” The captain motioned toward the door. “That’s all, Brady.”

Clay led the way, with Joe and Alex right behind him. The three walked down the hall to a different spot, a debriefing room with a small table and only six chairs. Again, Clay closed the door behind them, and the three of them took seats. Alex planted his elbows on the table and raked both hands through his hair. His remorse was quickly becoming something more like anger. “Did I ask for a vacation?” He spat the words at Clay and Joe, then tossed his hands and slammed himself back in his chair. “I shot to kill, like I’ve been trained to do in that situation. I don’t like it, but I had no choice. So why punish me?”

“Calm down.” Clay was usually the levelheaded one, but there was a simmering anger in his voice now too. “This is standard procedure when a deputy kills a suspect. You know that.”

Alex released a hard breath through clenched teeth. “It doesn’t make sense. I save a bunch of guys from getting bullets in their backs, and I’m kicked out for two weeks. How’s that fair?”

“It’s a vacation, Brady.” Joe laughed, but he sounded incredulous. “Make the most of it. Go see your mom or something.”

“I can’t leave Bo.”

“So fly Mom out here. Wouldn’t hurt you to spend a little time away from the office.” Joe bent down and patted Bo’s head. “Bo here feels the same way, right, Bo?”

The dog cocked his head to one side, and his ears came forward. But he didn’t bark. He wouldn’t without a command from Alex.

“Look, I’ll have the most input on the report.” Clay’s anger was gone now, and in its place he sounded tired. “Obviously, I’ll explain that you saw movement in a car at the other side of the parking lot, and you pursued the situation as part of your command to provide backup.”

Alex raised one eyebrow. “What about my implied assignment by the side of the building?”

“That was before you saw movement in one of the parked cars.” Clay said the words like they were fact, and they were. But the way he was wording his description of what happened meant there was no danger of Alex being reprimanded for acting on his instinct rather than by the book. Basically, Clay was going to bat for him in the biggest case of his career to date. Clay wasn’t finished. “I’ll explain that while you were pursuing the movement in the parked car, a suspect burst from inside the car and began shooting at the backs of your fellow deputies. At that time,” Clay’s look grew more intense, “and only after you saw the suspect start shooting, did you fire your gun.”

Joe watched the exchange between the two, doubt never once flickering in his expression. “You K9 guys have two choices. Shoot ‘em or dog ‘em. This time you had to do both.” Joe shrugged one shoulder. “Captain’s right. Open-shut case. Take the two weeks, then throw yourself back in the saddle.”

Alex was still reeling from Clay’s description of the events. They weren’t false, and they didn’t exactly stretch the truth. Everything happened so fast that day, he really wasn’t sure whether he saw the suspect’s gun first, or heard the gunfire first, or whether they both shot at the same time. In any case, his actions had been entirely warranted.

“I’ll finish my part of the report by confirming that a number of SWAT deputies could’ve lost their lives that day if not for your quick and accurate shooting.” He motioned to the others in the next room. “Every one of them on the scene would say the same thing.”

“Thank you, sir.” Alex kept up the formality because the matter was serious. But he had never felt Clay’s friendship more than at that moment. Bo pressed in against his leg, as if to say it was all going to be okay. They could take two weeks off and survive. “How am I supposed to spend my time?”

“I have an idea.” Joe took a folded sheet of paper from his back pocket. “LAPD’s doing a session on K9 training all next week, noon to four. I called, and they’d love to have you.”

“Tell him what they said.” Clay allowed the hint of a smile as he stretched his arm around the back of his chair.

Joe chuckled. “Apparently, the LAPD’s heard of you, Brady. The guy told me maybe you’d like to *teach* the course.”

The compliment hit its mark. It felt better than Alex might’ve imagined and took away some of the ache of knowing his bullet had killed a man. He didn’t bother containing the grin that tugged at the corners of his lips. He and Bo were building a reputation among good guys and bad. *Don’t mess with a deputy and his dog*. The fact made Alex hungry for patrol time, anxious for the next backup call. “Training’s good, but ...” he had to be careful with his words. “I’m concerned about the REA. I have a few leads, guys. I think we can catch them before they strike.”

“I thought I talked to you about that.” Clay sounded like a weary older brother. “SWAT’s aware of the REA. We’re watching them, Brady. We know where they’re meeting. Leave it to us.”

Alex stopped himself from saying anything more. This was the beginning of fire season, and the REA was primed for a hit. He’d been in contact with Owl, but the meeting had been postponed till tomorrow night. Alex still planned to go. What he did on his off time was up to him, as long as he didn’t break any laws.

“Do me a favor, then. Keep an eye on the Oak Canyon Estates, will you? A fire there would be huge.”

“*Brady ...*” Clay didn’t need to say anything else.

“Yes, sir.” Alex worked his jaw one way and then the other. “Am I allowed here at headquarters?”

“Not until we get the report in.” Joe felt bad for him, Alex could tell. “Look, man, don’t you surf?”

Alex worked to control his frustration. “I do. A few times a month ever since I moved here.”

“So go to the beach.” Joe shrugged his shoulders. “A little K9 training, a little time in the sun. Doesn’t sound that bad if you ask me.”

Clay’s face softened some. “Come for dinner Saturday, okay? Jamie’s cooking her world-class lasagna.”

“We’ll be there for sure. The kids love Jamie’s lasagna.” Joe headed for the door and slapped Alex on the shoulder. “Come on, Brady, stop pouting. It’s just two weeks.”

“So?” Clay followed Alex, but he stopped at the door. “You’ll be there?”

Alex reminded himself of the promise he'd made, that whenever he was invited, as far as it was possible, he'd say yes. So that he wouldn't lose himself completely. He nodded and tried to let a little kindness into his voice. "Yeah, Sarge, thanks. I'll be there." He felt the resignation come over him. "What should I bring?"

"A suntan." Clay grinned once more as he and Joe left the room.

Alex realized he'd been holding his breath, and he exhaled long and slow. A guy was dead because of his gun, and that would stay with him. But he hadn't had a choice, and it wasn't fair that he was being taken off the streets — even for two weeks. What if a showdown happened with REA? If anyone should be in on the arrest of a bunch of cowardly arsonists, it was he and Bo. He looked out the window at the tree branches blowing in the distance. The wind had let up, but not for long. It just took one strong day of Santa Anas and the REA could make their move.

He stood, defeated. "Okay, Bo, let's get going."

The memory of Holly didn't find him again until he walked through the front door of his townhouse. She'd been here to his place, but just once. The summer after he left the East Coast, she followed him out here, determined to find her way back to his heart. She'd gotten the address from his mother, and she'd come unannounced.

Alex flopped down on his sofa, and Bo curled up in a ball on the floor beside his feet. "Good boy, Bo." The dog lifted his eyes, and utter loyalty filled his features. He would've destroyed anyone who tried to harm Alex, no question about it. Every breath he drew had one purpose — to protect Alex and the other members of the department. Alex rubbed the spot under the dog's chin. "Get some rest, Bo. We'll run later." The dog settled back down, and Alex stared at his front door, remembering what it had been like to see Holly that summer day in 2002.

That was before Bo, back when he lived here by himself. He'd just gotten home from a run at Pierce College, and he had four hours before he had to report to his job as a custody assistant at the men's jail. He was headed for the shower when the doorbell rang. Alex hesitated, suspicious of anyone who would come to his door. He knew no one and had no friends in the area. He was convincing himself the caller must be soliciting one thing or another when he opened the door, and there she was.

Holly.

Like something out of his unrelenting dreams, she stood there, more beautiful than she'd been at their senior grad party — the last time he'd seen her. Older

and with more wisdom in her eyes. It took him half a minute before he rebounded enough to say something. When he did, he was still trying to make sense of her standing there. “Holly ... what are you ... how did you ...?”

She laughed, but it sounded more nervous than funny. “Hi.” She didn’t make a move in his direction. “Your mother told me where you lived. I flew in this morning and rented a car.”

The Holly he’d known was confident and charismatic, with a charm and joy that could take over a room. But she was only nineteen, and she seemed overwhelmed by what she’d done. He felt the same way. After all, she’d flown here by herself from New York, rented a car, and navigated the LA freeways all in an attempt to find him. Even knowing that he clearly hadn’t wanted to be found.

Her laughter faded, and she locked eyes with his. “Can I come in?”

“Yes.” Alex could have kicked himself. He didn’t have room in his life for a relationship with Holly, but he had no reason to be rude. “Sorry.” He stepped aside and motioned for her to come in. That’s when he realized he was wearing only the scrap of a muscle shirt and running shorts. He must’ve smelled horrific.

She looked around the dark living room, and he saw it for the first time through the eyes of a visitor. Dishes were stacked on the coffee table, and newspapers were scattered along the sofa. Dirty socks and an occasional towel lay on the floor. Alex managed a weak smile. He couldn’t believe she was here, let alone try to reckon with the condition of his condo. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

“Apparently.” She slid a stack of newspapers off the couch and onto the floor and sat down. “Go shower, Alex. We need to talk.”

He didn’t say anything, just followed her directions and hurried himself down the hallway and into the shower. The respite gave him time to collect his thoughts and form a plan. Never mind that his heart hadn’t beaten normally since he first saw her standing on his doorstep, or that seeing her had a way of making him forget 9/11 ever happened. The fact was, he had different passions now — the all-consuming desire to make his father proud, to prevent other innocent lives from being lost. She deserved more than he could offer.

By the time he was dressed and ready to face her, his emotions were firmly in check. He found her standing near his bookcase, looking at a photo of his parents. The same one that had caught her eye when she was a freshman in high school. For a moment he remembered how it used to be, how much he’d loved her. But his heart wasn’t wired the way it had been back then. The only

thing that drove him now was school and the idea that one day he would be protecting others from the pain he'd been dealt. He couldn't ease up long enough to love or laugh or let down his guard.

She must've sensed him there behind her, because she spoke without turning around. "They really did have something special, Alex." She returned the picture and turned to him. "Death can't change that."

He didn't cry, hadn't shed tears since that horrible day after the terrorist attacks. But in that moment he had to swallow hard to stuff his feelings. "I know." He motioned for her to take her seat again, and he took the chair closest to her. What he needed to say was very important, and he didn't want her to misunderstand. For a while he only looked at her, letting himself remember how it used to be between them. Finally, he cleared his throat and tried to round up the right words. "But death changed a lot of other things. For me, anyway."

"You told me that last year. When you said good-bye." She slid to the edge of the sofa and reached for his hand.

He wanted to resist her, but he couldn't. She was his friend, and he wouldn't hurt her anymore than he had to. He let his fingers be drawn between hers. "So, why are you here?"

"I gave you a year." Tears made her eyes shine. "I figured if I gave you enough time, you'd work through all this." She lifted her free hand and let it fall to her lap again. "The pain you have about losing your dad, and whatever else you're dealing with."

She didn't understand at all. "What happened on September 11 isn't something I'll ever work through." His voice was tender, desperate for her to grasp what he was saying. "It changed me." He released her hand, stood, and paced to the far window. "It changed how I feel about God and family and myself."

"And me, Alex?" She was on her feet and when she reached him, she put her hand on his shoulder. "The attacks changed how you feel about me?"

He looked deep into her eyes, and lifted his fingers to her face. "Holly ..." For a precarious moment he wondered if he might kiss her, if he might welcome her back into his life. Then before he could cross that line, he forced himself to answer her question. "Yes. They changed that too." He moved his hand from her cheek and pressed it to his chest. "Inside me, something died that day, and it won't ever live again. Not ever." Once more he brushed his knuckles against her feathery soft cheek. "I couldn't do that to you, ask you to stay with me when I'm ... I'm not the same as I was back then."

“But you are.” Her tears came harder then. Clearly this wasn’t the response she’d expected to get by coming all the way to LA to see him. “Deep inside you, you’re the same, and one day you’ll wake up and wonder why you threw it all away, why you couldn’t bring yourself to move on like everyone else who lost someone that day.”

Her words steeled him to her, made the rest of the conversation easy. He took a step back, his heart hurting and cold. “It’s over, Holly. I’m sorry.” He grabbed his keys and his wallet and looked at her one last time. “I’m leaving, and when I come back you need to be gone.”

“That’s it?” She yelled at him then, tears streaming down her face. “No good-bye, nothing? I come all the way here to tell you I still love you, and this is all the time you’ll give me?”

He was dizzy from the guilt tearing into him, but he couldn’t stop himself. He took gentle hold of her shoulders and silenced her with an embrace, a hug that lasted nearly three minutes. The whole time he let her cry, let her sobs shake both of them, until finally he could feel her regaining control, accepting his words even if they all but destroyed her.

Finally, he drew back and spoke to her for the last time. “Good-bye, Holly. I’m sorry.” He left without looking back, and for the next three hours he drove the LA freeways, forcing himself not to turn around and run to her. She deserved better, he kept telling himself. He had no room in his life for a relationship when all he wanted was to fight crime. When he returned home that night, she was gone.

That was the last he’d seen or heard from Holly Brooks.

He blinked and stared at the window, the place where they’d shared their last hug. He could still see her standing there, the questions in her eyes, the love in her heart. He groaned out loud and ran his fingers hard through his hair. He could usually go a whole day without thinking about her, and when he was swamped at work, even a handful of days, or a week. But lately she seemed to creep up from her place in his heart more often.

Sometimes it was his mother’s fault. She would bring Holly’s name up once in awhile, but Alex always stopped her. “I want to talk to you, Mom, but you gotta keep her out of this. She’s probably married with kids by now, the way she should be. It doesn’t help me stay focused when you keep bringing her up.”

Bo was running in his sleep again. Alex leaned over and stroked the dog’s head. He’d done the right thing, sending her away. He was not living the life he and Holly had dreamed of back when they were high school kids, back

when he actually believed God had plans for His people.

For a fraction of an instant, he almost let himself return to that awful Tuesday morning, to the place where his life truly changed forever. But he stopped the memories before they could come to life. He stood up and headed to his bedroom. The place was clean now. At least he'd learned that much about living on his own. He grabbed a T-shirt and a pair of shorts, and ten minutes later he and Bo were headed off to Pierce College. If he ran the hills hard enough, maybe he could escape not only Holly's memory, but also the memory of the terrorist attacks themselves. Because some things from his past didn't only haunt him. They threatened to destroy him.

Hoofstuk 10

Die herinneringe aan Holly het langer as gewoonlik by hom gebly; deur die nag en selfs toe hy by die gyselaarsdrama opdaag en dinge vinnig op sy eie hanteer het. Arme Clay het nie geweet hoe hy teenoor hom moet optree daar waar hy in sy polisiemotor gesit het met Bo langs hom op die grond nie. Hy het net 'n paar woorde oor die insident gesê.

Wat was hy veronderstel om te sê? Hy het nie daarvan gehou om die skelm op die grond te sien lê en doodbloei nie, maar iemand moes hom keer. Dit is waaraan hy sy lewe wy; om die kriminele van die straat af te hou, om sy pa trots te maak. Om sy deel te doen om te keer dat gesinne uitmekaargeskeur word soos syne.

Ja, hy het op instink gereageer, om saam met Bo weg te glip na die agterkant van die parkeerarea. Maar hy het 'n gevoel gehad oor die motors wat daar geparkeer gestaan het, en toe hy naderbeweeg, was hy seker hy het iemand in die middelste een sien beweeg. Teen die tyd toe die tweede gewapende man uit die motor gesprong en begin skiet het, was Alex gereed. Soos hy gereed was die oomblik toe hy 'n polisieman geword het.

Clay het gedink Alex is stil oor die skietery, maar dit was nie al rede nie. Die skietery was iets wat moes gebeur het, 'n bewys dat hy op die regte plek was. Hy voel sleg omdat hy die man geskiet het, maar watter mal persoon sal dit waag om uit sy wegkruipplek te kom en op 'n groep SWAT-offisiere te begin skiet wat met hul rûe na hom toe staan? 'n Mal mens soos daardie sal nie twee keer dink om weer iemand dood te maak as hy vrygelaat word nie.

Die afstand in sy oë was oor meer as die skietery. Die rede hoekom hy nie regtig iets te sê gehad het nie, was omdat hy aan Holly gedink het. Want die feit dat hy die krimineel geskiet het, is die rede hoekom hy haar agtergelaat het. Gewoonlik kan hy die herinneringe aan haar vinnig wegstoot en wegbêre in 'n koue, lugdigte kamer in sy hart waar dit nooit die daglig sal sien nie. Maar hierdie keer het die herinnering aan haar by hom bly spook – haar stem het met hom gepraat terwyl hy die oggend werk toe gery het, die gevoel van haar hand in syne terwyl hy die strate gepatrolleer het, was so sterk sy kon

netsoewel langs hom gesit het. Die enigste keer wat hy nie aan haar gedink het nie, was terwyl hy na die toneel gejaag het om ondersteuning te bied en terwyl hy met die slegte ouens afgereken het. Die oomblik toe die gevaar verby was, was sy terug, haar helder blou oë wat 'n gat in sy hart brand.

Nou is dit Woensdagmiddag en hy is weer op pad werk toe. Sy sersant het vir hom gesê dat dit dalk nie 'n goeie dag vir oortyd is nie, vanweë die drama van die vorige dag. Maar Alex wil soveel oortyd werk as wat hy kan. Elke uur wat hy werk, help om die herinneringe aan die verlede 'n bietjie verder weg te stoot, terug na waar dit hoort.

Hy parkeer sy polisiemotor, klim uit en maak vir Bo oop waar hy op die agterste sitplek sit. Dit is nou al September en die Santa Ana-winde word sterker. Hy kyk na die heuwels wat die gebied omring op soek na tekens van 'n veldbrand. Hy sien niks nie. “Komaan, Bo. Laat ons gaan werk.” Saam loop hulle in en die oomblik toe hy in die teekamer in stap, weet hy iets het gebeur. Die ouens fluister vir mekaar terwyl hulle koffie en 'n sitplek kry. Die grappies en onverbiddelike tergerie is nêrens te bespeur nie.

“Gaan iemand vir my sê wat aan die gang is?” Alex gaan staan en Bo gaan sit dadelik langs hom. Alex kyk na die gesigte van die mans om hom. “Enigiemand?”

Clay kom om die hoek gestap en gaan staan. Hy is die eerste een wat met Alex oogkontak maak vandat hy by die deur in geloop het. “Brady ... ons moet met jou in die kantoor praat.”

Alex probeer hard om te dink wat kon gebeur het om hierdie soort reaksie onder die manne te veroorsaak. Het iemand hom buite die ROA se hoofkwartier gesien? Gaan hy sy werk verloor omdat hy die polisie se reëls verbreek het?

In die kantoor leun Clay en Joe teen die een muur, en agter 'n massiewe lessenaar sit drie van die polisie se offisiere met die hoogste rang. Clay maak die deur agter hulle toe en Alex bly staan. Hy bestudeer elkeen van die mans in beheer se oë. Hy wag totdat een van hulle praat.

“Brady, ons het slegte nuus.” Een van die polisiestasie se kapteins pers sy lippe op mekaar.

Gaan dit oor sy ma? Hy praat so nou en dan met haar, maar nooit vir lank nie. Haar nuwe man het geld, en hulle twee is altyd op pad na die een of ander geldinsamelings- of liefdadigheidsdinee. Sy is besig met haar eie lewe. Sy verstaan hoe hy oor sy werk voel, dat dit alles vir hom beteken. Maar het iets nou met haar ook gebeur? Daar is duisend gedagtes wat deur sy kop flits.

“Die verdagte wat jy by gister se misdad toneel geskiet het?” die kaptein frons, sy stem baie ernstig. “Hy is vanoggend oorlede. Ons het so pas gehoor.”

Alex voel dadelik die seer van lewensverlies in 'n deel van sy siel waar enige dood altyd sal seermaak, altyd sal indring teen die ideaal. Hy maak keel skoon en staan 'n bietjie regop. “Ek is jammer om dit te hoor, Meneer.”

“Dit beteken natuurlik dat daar ondersoek ingestel gaan word. Maar dit is

slegs standaardprosedure.” Die kommandant vou sy arms voor sy bors. “En vir jou, Brady, beteken dit twee weke se verlof.” Dit voel vir Alex of iemand hom so pas geskop het. “Twee weke, Meneer?”

“Twee weke om jou kop skoon te kry, jong man.” Joe trek sy een voet teen die muur op en leun op sy knie. “Dit is ’n goeie ding, Brady. Glo my.”

“Ons sal jou op hoogte hou tydens die ondersoek. Die saak gaan gou afgehandel wees. Ons sal jou laat weet wanneer dit finaal in die vorm van ’n verslag saamgestel is.” Die kaptein wys na die deur. “Dit is al, Brady.”

Clay loop eerste uit, met Joe en Alex agter hom. Die drie loop in die gang af na ’n ander vertrek, ’n ondervragingskamer met ’n klein tafeltjie en net ses stoele. Weer maak Clay die deur agter hulle toe, en hulle gaan sit. Alex leun met sy elmboë op die tafel en trek albei sy hande deur sy hare. Sy berou is vinnig besig om in iets soos woede te verander. “Het ek gevra vir ’n vakansie?” Hy spoeg die woorde teenoor Clay en Joe uit, gooi sy hande in die lug en val terug in sy stoel. “Ek het geskiet om dood te skiet, soos ek opgelei is om in ’n situasie soos daardie te doen. Ek hou nie daarvan nie, maar ek het nie ’n keuse gehad nie. Hoekom word ek nou gestraf?”

“Kalmeer.” Clay is gewoonlik die een wat altyd in beheer bly, maar daar is ook nou in sy stem woede te bespeur. “Dit is standaardprosedure wanneer ’n polisieman ’n verdagte doodskiet. Jy weet dit.”

Alex blaas sy asem hoorbaar uit deur sy tande wat op mekaar gekners is. “Dit maak nie sin nie. Ek red ’n klomp ouens deur te verhoed dat daar op hulle geskiet word, en ek word vir twee weke weggestuur. Hoe kan dit regverdig wees?”

“Dit is ’n vakansie, Brady.” Joe lag, maar hy klink ongelowig. “Geniet dit. Gaan kuier vir jou ma of iets.”

“Ek kan nie vir Bo alleen los nie.”

“Laat jou ma dan hiernatoe vlieg. Dit sal jou nie skade doen om ’n bietjie tyd weg van die kantoor af deur te bring nie.” Joe buk af en vryf Bo se kop. “Bo stem saam, nè, Bo?”

Die hond draai sy kop na die een kant, en sy ore beweeg vorentoe. Maar hy blaf nie. Hy sal nie sonder dat hy ’n bevel van Alex gekry het nie.

“Kyk, ek sal die meeste insette lewer wanneer dit by die verslag kom.” Clay se woede is nou weg, en hy klink eerder moeg. “Uit die aard van die saak sal ek verduidelik dat jy iets in die motor aan die ander kant van die parkeerarea sien beweeg het, en jy het dit hanteer as deel van die bevel om ondersteuning te bied.”

Alex trek sy een wenkbrou op. “Wat van my opdrag om langs die gebou stelling in te neem?”

“Dit was voor jy beweging in een van die geparkeerde motors gesien het.”

Clay sê die woorde asof dit ’n feit is, en dit is ook. Maar die manier waarop hy sy beskrywing van die gebeure verwoord, beteken dat Alex nie die gevaar loop om gestraf te word omdat hy op instink eerder as volgens die reëls opgetree het nie. Die feit is dat Clay vir hom gaan opkom in een van die

grootste sake van sy loopbaan tot dusver. Clay is nog nie klaar nie. “Ek sal verduidelik dat, terwyl jy jou aandag op die beweging in die motor gevestig het, ’n verdagte vanuit die motor gespring het en op die ander polisiemanne begin skiet het wat met hulle rûe na hom gestaan het.” Clay se gesigsuitdrukking word ernstiger. “Op daardie oomblik, en eers nadat jy gesien het die verdagte begin skiet, het jy op hom geskiet.”

Joe kyk na die manier waarop die twee na mekaar kyk, en daar is geen twyfel op sy gesig te bespeur nie. “Julle ouens van die honde-eenheid het twee keuses: skiet hulle of sit die hond op hulle. Hierdie keer moes jy al twee uitoefen.” Joe haal sy een skouer op. “Die kaptein is reg. Dit gaan ’n vinnige saak wees. Vat die twee weke af en kom dan terug met nuwe ywer.”

Alex is steeds dronkgeslaan deur Clay se beskrywing van die gebeure. Dit is nie ’n leuen nie, maar dit is ook nie presies die waarheid nie. Daardie dag het alles so vinnig gebeur, hy is nie seker of hy eers die verdagte se geweer gesien het of eers die skote gehoor het nie, en of hulle dalk op dieselfde tydstop begin skiet het nie. In elk geval, sy optrede was totaal geregverdig.

“Ek sal my deel van die verslag afsluit deur te bevestig dat ’n klompie SWAT-lede daardie dag hulle lewens kon verloor het as dit nie vir jou vinnige optrede was en die feit dat jy raak geskiet het nie.” Hy wys na die ander in die vertrek langsaan. “Almal van hulle wat op die toneel was, sal dieselfde ding sê.”

“Dankie, Meneer.” Alex bly formeel omdat die saak ernstig is. Maar hy was nooit meer bewus van Clay se vriendskap as op hierdie oomblik nie. Bo druk teen sy been, asof hy sê alles gaan goed afloop. Hulle kan twee weke met verlof gaan en dit oorleef. “Hoe is ek veronderstel om die tyd om te kry?”

“Ek het ’n idee.” Joe haal ’n stukkie gevoude papier uit sy agtersak. “Los Angeles Polisie het volgende week in die middae ’n kursus oor honde-opleiding. Ek het gebel en hulle is baie opgewonde dat jy moet kom.”

“Sê vir hom wat hulle gesê het.” Clay glimlag toe hy sy arm om die agterkant van sy stoel strek.

Joe lag. “Hulle het klaarblyklik van jou gehoor, Brady. Die man het vir my gevra of jy nie dalk die kursus wil *aanbied* nie.”

Die kompliment is in die kol. Dit voel beter as wat Alex gedink het dit sal en vat ’n bietjie van die seer weg omdat hy iemand doodgeskiet het. Hy probeer nie die glimlag wegsteek wat aan sy mondhoeke trek nie. Hy en Bo is besig om ’n reputasie tot stand te bring tussen die goeie en slegte ouens. Moenie met ’n polisieman en sy hond sukkel nie. Dit maak Alex lus om die strate te patrolleer; hy kan nie wag vir ’n oproep om êrens ondersteuning te gaan bied nie. “Opleiding is goed, maar ... ” hy moet sy woorde versigtig kies. “Ek is bekommerd oor die ROA. Ek het ’n paar leidrade. Ek dink ons kan hulle vang voordat hulle toeslaan.”

“Ek het gedink ek het klaar met jou daaroor gepraat.” Clay klink soos ’n ouer broer wat nie meer raad het nie. “SWAT is bewus van die ROA. Ons hou hulle dop. Ons weet waar hulle ontmoet. Los dit vir ons.”

Alex keer homself om verder iets te sê. Dit is die begin van die vuurseisoen, en die ROA is op die punt om aan te val. Hy het kontak gehou met Uil, maar die ontmoeting is tot môre aand uitgestel. Alex is steeds van plan om te gaan. Wat hy in sy vrye tyd doen, is sy saak, solank hy nie enige reëls oortree nie.

“Doen my ’n guns. Hou asseblief ’n ogie op Oak Canyon Estates. ’n Veldbrand by daardie landgoed sal vernietigend wees.”

“*Brady ...*” Clay het nie nodig om verder te praat nie.

“Ja, Meneer.” Alex beweeg sy kakebeen heen en weer. “Word ek hier by hoofkantoor toegelaat?”

“Nie totdat ons die verslag gekry het nie.” Joe voel jammer vir hom, Alex kan dit sien. “Man, ry jy nie branderplank nie?”

Alex probeer hard om sy frustrasie te beheer. “Ja, ek ry. ’n Paar keer elke maand sedert ek hierna toe getrek het.”

“Gaan dan strand toe.” Joe haal sy skouers op. “’n Bietjie honde-opleiding, ’n bietjie tyd in die son. Klink nie sleg as jy my vra nie.”

Clay se gesigsuitdrukking versag. “Kom eet Saterdagmiddag by ons, reg so? Jamie maak haar beroemde lasagne.”

“Ons sal definitief daar wees. Die kinders is mal oor Jamie se lasagne.” Joe loop deur toe en sit sy hand op Alex se skouer. “Komaan, Brady, hou op dikmond wees. Dit is net twee weke.”

“So?” Clay volg vir Alex, maar gaan staan dan by die deur. “Gaan jy kom?”

Alex herinner homself aan die belofte wat hy gemaak het, dat wanneer hy uitgenooi word, hy sover moontlik sal ja sê. Sodat hy homself nie totaal verloor nie. Hy knik en probeer vriendelik klink. “Ja, Sersant, dankie. Ek sal daar wees.” Hy voel hoe berusting oor hom spoel. “Wat kan ek saambring?”

“Jou lyf wat gesonbrand is.” Clay glimlag weer ’n keer toe hy en Joe die vertrek verlaat.

Alex besef dat hy nog die hele tyd sy asem inhou, en hy asem lank en stadig uit. Iemand is dood as gevolg van hom, en dit sal by hom bly. Maar hy het nie ’n keuse gehad nie, en dit is nie regverdig dat hy nie kan werk nie – al is dit ook net twee weke. Wat as die ROA iets doen? As daar iemand is wat daar moet wees wanneer ’n groep lafhartige brandstigters in hegtenis geneem word, is dit hy en Bo. Hy kyk by die venster uit na die boomtakke wat in die verte waai. Die wind het effens gaan lê, maar nie vir lank nie. Dit neem net een dag met sterk Santa Ana-winde wat waai en die ROA kan hulle plan tot uitvoer bring.

Hy staan daar soos iemand wat ’n neerlaag gely het. “Oukei, Bo, kom ons gaan dan maar.”

Die herinnering aan Holly is vir ’n rukkie vergete, totdat hy by sy huis se voordeur in loop. Sy was al hier by sy huis, maar nog net een keer. Die somer nadat hy die Ooskus verlaat het, het sy hom opgesoek, vasberade om weer sy hart te wen. Sy het die adres by sy ma gekry en sonder om hom te laat weet daar opgedaag.

Alex val op die bank neer en Bo krul in ’n bondeltjie langs hom op die vloer.

“Oubaas se hond.” Die hond lig sy oë en sy gesig spreek van lojaliteit. Hy sal iemand wat iets aan Alex probeer doen totaal vernietig, daar is geen twyfel aan nie. Hy haal asem vir net een doel: om Alex en die ander polisielede te beskerm. Alex vryf Bo onder sy ken. “Rus eers ’n bietjie, Bo. Ons sal later gaan hardloop.” Die hond gaan lê weer en Alex staar na die voordeur, en onthou hoe dit gevoel het om Holly daardie somersdag in 2002 te sien.

Dit was voordat hy vir Bo gehad het, toe hy nog alleen gebly het. Hy het net by die huis gekom nadat hy by Pierce College gaan hardloop het, en daar was vier uur oor voordat hy by die manstronk as assistent moes aanmeld. Hy was op pad om te gaan stort toe die voordeurklokkie lui. Alex het geaarsel, agterdogtig oor enigiemand wat na sy huis toe kom. Hy het niemand geken nie en geen vriende hier naby gehad nie. Hy het gedink dat iemand seker iets kom vra. Toe maak hy die deur oop en daar het sy gestaan.

Holly.

Soos iets uit sy drome het sy daar gestaan, mooier as wat sy gelyk het by die partytjie in hulle laaste jaar op skool – die laaste keer wat hy haar gesien het. Ouer en met meer wysheid in haar oë. Dit het hom langer as dertig sekondes geneem om hom reg te ruk en iets te sê. Toe hy wel iets sê, het hy steeds gewonder hoekom sy daar staan. “Holly ... wat doen jy ... hoe het jy ... ?”

Sy het gelag, maar dit het geklink of sy op haar senuwees is. “Haai.” Sy het nie beweeg nie. “Jou ma het vir my gesê waar jy bly. Ek het vanoggend hierheen gevlieg en ’n motor gehuur.”

Die Holly wat hy geken het, was selfversekerd en charismaties, met ’n aanvalligheid en vreugde wat ’n hele vertrek kon vul. Maar sy was net negentien jaar oud, en sy het oorweldig gelyk deur dit wat sy gedoen het. Hy het dieselfde gevoel. Sy het immers alleen vanaf New York gevlieg, ’n motor gehuur en op Los Angeles se paaie rondgery, alles net om hom te kry. Selfs al het sy geweet hy wil nie hê iemand moet hom kry nie.

Haar lag het weggesterf en sy het hom in die oë gekyk. “Kan ek inkom?”

Alex kon homself skop. Hy het nie plek gehad in sy lewe vir ’n verhouding met Holly nie, maar hy het geen rede gehad om ongeskik te wees nie. “Jammer.” Hy het weggetree en vir haar gewys om in te kom. Dit is toe dat hy besef al wat hy aan het, is sy noupassende hempie en drafbroekie. Hy moes baie sleg geruik het.

Sy het in die donker leefvertrek rondgekyk en hy het dit vir die eerste keer deur die oë van ’n besoeker gesien. Vuil koppies en borde het oral op die koffietafel gestaan en koerante het al langs die bank gelê. Vuil sokkies en ’n verlore handdoek het op die vloer gelê. Alex het flou geglimlag. Hy kon nie glo sy was hier nie, laat staan nog om te probeer rekening hou met die toestand waarin in sy huis is. “Ek het nie besoekers verwag nie.”

“Klaarblyklik nie.” Sy het ’n pak koerante van die bank af vloer toe geskuif en gaan sit. “Gaan stort, Alex. Ons moet praat.”

Hy het niks gesê nie, net gemaak soos sy sê en met die gang af geloop stort toe. Gedurende die tydjie alleen kon hy sy gedagtes orden en aan ’n plan dink.

Ongeag die feit dat sy hart nie normaal geklop het sedert hy haar die eerste keer by sy voordeur gesien het nie, of dat om haar te sien hom byna laat vergeet het dat 11 September ooit gebeur het. Die punt was egter dat hy nou ander passies gehad het – die allesoorheersende begeerte om sy pa trots te maak, om te voorkom dat onskuldige lewens verlore gaan. Sy het meer verdien as wat hy kon gee.

Teen die tyd dat hy aangetrek was, gereed om haar in die oë te kyk, was sy emosies onder beheer. Hy het haar gekry waar sy by sy boekrak staan en na 'n foto van sy ouers kyk. Dieselfde een wat haar oog gevang het toe hulle op hoërskool was. Vir 'n oomblik het hy onthou hoe dit was, hoe baie hy haar liefgehad het. Maar sy hart was nie meer ingestel soos toe nie. Die enigste ding wat nou vir hom dryfkrag gegee het, was sy studies en die idee dat hy eendag ander gaan beskerm van die pyn wat hy ervaar het. Hy kon nie lank genoeg ontspan om lief te hê of te lag of voor haar te swig nie.

Sy moes aangevoel het dat hy agter haar staan, want sy het gepraat sonder om om te draai. “Hulle het regtig iets spesiaals gehad, Alex.” Sy het die foto weer neergesit en na hom toe gedraai. “Die dood kan dit nie verander nie.”

Hy het nog nooit weer sedert daardie aaklige dag ná die terroriste-aanvalle gehuil nie. Maar op daardie oomblik moes hy hard sluk om sy gevoelens te onderdruk. “Ek weet.” Hy het vir haar gewys om weer te gaan sit en hy het op die stoel die naaste aan haar stelling ingeneem. Wat hy moes sê, was baie belangrik, en hy wou nie hê sy moes hom verkeerd verstaan nie. Vir 'n rukkie het hy net na haar gekyk, homself laat onthou hoe dit tussen hulle was. Uiteindelik het hy keel skoon gemaak en probeer om die regte woorde te vind. “Maar die dood het baie ander dinge verander. Vir my, in elk geval.”

“Jy het dit verlede jaar vir my gesê. Toe jy totsiens gesê het.” Sy het na die voorkant van die bank geskuif en na sy hand uitgereik.

Hy wou sy hand terugtrek, maar hy kon nie. Sy was sy vriendin, en hy wou haar nie seerder maak as wat hy moes nie. Hy het toegelaat dat haar vingers deur syne vleg. “Nou hoekom is jy hier?”

“Ek het vir jou 'n jaar gegee.” Trane het haar oë laat blink. “Ek het gereken dat as ek jou genoeg tyd gee, jy al die dinge sou verwerk.” Sy het haar ander hand gelig en dit toe weer op haar skoot laat val. “Die seer wat jy in jou dra as gevolg van jou pa se dood, en al die ander dinge wat jy ook moet verwerk.”

Sy het glad nie verstaan nie. “Wat op 11 September gebeur het, is nie iets wat ek ooit sal verwerk nie.” Sy stem was sag, desperaat om haar te laat verstaan wat hy sê. “Dit het my verander.” Hy het haar hand gelos, opgestaan en na die venster aan die ander kant van die vertrek geloop. “Dit het verander hoe ek oor God en my gesin en myself voel.”

“En oor my, Alex?” Sy het opgestaan en toe sy by hom is, het sy haar hand op sy skouer gesit. “Het die aanvalle verander hoe jy oor my voel?”

Hy het diep in haar oë gekyk en met sy vingers aan haar gesig geraak. “Holly ...” Vir 'n kosbare oomblik het hy gewonder of hy haar dalk gaan soen, of hy haar gaan terugverwelkom in sy lewe. Toe, voordat hy daardie punt bereik,

het hy homself gedwing om haar vraag te beantwoord. “Ja. Die aanvalle het dit ook verander.” Hy het sy hand van haar wang af weggevat en dit teen sy bors gedruk. “Daardie dag het iets binne-in my doodgegaan, en dit sal nooit weer lewe nie. Nooit weer nie.” Hy het sy kneukels nog een keer oor haar sagte wang gevryf. “Ek kon dit nie aan jou doen nie. Ek kon jou nie vra om by my te bly terwyl ek ... terwyl ek nie dieselfde as toe is nie.”

“Maar jy is.” Sy het erger begin huil. Duidelik is dit nie die reaksie wat sy verwag het nadat sy al die pad na Los Angeles gekom het om hom te sien nie. “Diep binne-in jou is jy dieselfde, en eendag gaan jy wakker word en wonder hoekom jy alles weggegooi het, hoekom jy nie soos almal wat daardie dag iemand verloor het tot die punt gekom het om aan te beweeg nie.”

Haar woorde het hom hard gemaak teenoor haar, en die res van die gesprek maklik gemaak. Hy het teruggetree, sy hart seer en koud. “Dit is verby, Holly. Ek is jammer.” Hy het sy sleutels en beursie gevat en vir ’n laaste keer na haar gekyk. “Ek gaan nou gaan, en wanneer ek terugkom, moet jy asseblief weg wees.”

“Is dit dít?” sy het op hom geskree en die trane het oor haar gesig gerol. “Nie totsiens nie, niks? Ek het al die pad hierheen gekom om vir jou te sê ek is nog lief vir jou, en dit is al tyd wat jy my gee?”

Die skuldgevoel het hom laat duiselig voel, dit het gevoel of dit hom uitmekaarskeur, maar hy kon homself nie keer nie. Hy het sag aan haar skouers gevat en haar stil gemaak deur vir haar ’n drukkie te gee – ’n drukkie wat vir omtrent drie minute aangehou het. Die hele tyd het hy haar toegelaat om te huil, dat haar snikke albei van hulle laat ruk, totdat hy uiteindelik kon voel dat sy weer beheer oor haar emosies het, dat sy sy woorde aanvaar selfs al het dit haar vernietig.

Uiteindelik het hy haar laat los en vir die laaste keer met haar gepraat. “Totsiens, Holly. Ek is jammer.” Hy het geloop sonder om terug te kyk en vir die volgende drie uur het hy op Los Angeles se deurpaaie rondgery, homself gedwing om nie om te draai en na haar toe te hardloop nie. Sy het beter verdien, het hy vir homself bly sê. Hy het nie plek gehad in sy lewe vir ’n verhouding nie. Nie as al wat hy wou doen, was om misdaad te beveg nie. Toe hy daardie aand teruggegaan het huis toe, was sy weg.

Dit was die laaste keer wat hy van Holly Brooks gehoor of haar gesien het.

Hy knip sy oë en staar na die venster, die plek waar hulle mekaar die laaste keer omhels het. Hy kan haar steeds daar sien staan, die vraagtekens in haar oë, die liefde in haar hart. Hy kreun hard en trek sy vingers woes deur sy hare. Hy kan gewoonlik vir ’n hele dag nie aan haar dink nie, en wanneer hy toegegooi is onder die werk is dit selfs vyf of sewe dae. Maar deesdae lyk dit of sy meer gereeld uit haar plek in sy hart kruip.

Soms is dit sy ma se skuld. Sy sal nou en dan van Holly praat, maar Alex het haar altyd gekeer. “Ek wil met Ma praat, maar Ma moet haar hieruit hou. Sy is waarskynlik nou al getroud met kinders, soos sy behoort te wees. As Ma haar die hele tyd noem, help dit my nie om gefokus te bly nie.”

Bo is weer besig om te droom hy hardloop. Alex leun vooroor en vryf die hond se kop. Hy het die regte ding gedoen deur haar weg te stuur. Hy is nie besig om die lewe te leef waarom hy en Holly gedroom het toe hulle op hoërskool was nie, toe hy nog geglo het God het 'n plan vir sy mense.

Vir 'n oomblik keer hy amper terug na daardie aaklige Dinsdagoggend, toe sy lewe werklik vir altyd verander het. Maar hy keer die herinneringe voordat dit 'n werklikheid kan word. Hy staan op en loop na sy kamer toe. Die plek is nou skoon. Ten minste het hy dit geleer terwyl hy alleen bly. Hy gryp 'n T-hemp en 'n broek, en tien minute later is hy en Bo op pad na Pierce College. As hy die bultjies vinnig genoeg hardloop, sal hy miskien van die herinneringe aan Holly kan weghardloop, maar ook van die herinnering aan die terroriste-aanvalle. Want sekere dinge uit sy verlede bly nie net by hom spook nie. Dit dreig om hom te vernietig.

ELEVEN

Holly was about to leave her office for the day when Dave and Ron came through the door in a hurry, their voices intense. She settled back down at her desk so she could hear them better. Whatever they were discussing, Dave sounded upset with his son.

“You can’t take that sort of thing lightly.” The older man was pacing.

“I’m hardly taking it lightly. I called the police, didn’t I?”

“A threat of arson? We should have the whole sheriff’s department down here patrolling the place. Someone could get hurt.”

Ron was clearly trying to keep from fighting. His voice fell a notch. “Take a deep breath, Dad. Seriously. It was one phone call.”

“At a time when environmental terrorists are plotting against people like you and me.” Fear welled up in Holly. She stood and moved hesitantly into the next room. “You received a threat about fire?”

Ron gave her a pacifying look. “It was nothing. Sounded like a bunch of kids.”

“Kids don’t make those kinds of threats.” Dave had a pencil in his hand, and he tapped it against the edge of the table. His expression made it clear how serious he was. “When did you call the police?”

“As soon as I hung up.” Ron leaned back in his seat. If he was worried about the call, he didn’t act like it. “They’ve made a record of the threat, and they promised to patrol up here more often than before.”

“The thing is, we have the gate and the security system.” Holly didn’t want to take sides, but she’d always been comforted by that fact. “No one’s going to start a fire while we’re here. And the gate’s half a mile down the road.”

“Right.” Ron smiled first at her, then at his father. “If they drove through the gate or hoofed it up the road, they’d set off the silent security sensors. The

sheriff's department would be here before they reached the top of the hill."

"It'd be easier to find a development they could drive up to." Holly didn't wish this sort of thing on anyone, but it terrified her to imagine it happening here.

"Exactly." Ron gave his father a reassuring look. "Come on, lighten up. We've thought this through. We have a hundred grand in that gate and security system. We're safe up here, no matter who made the call."

Holly listened, desperate to believe him. The way the homes lay right along the canyon, a fire would pick up speed and barrel down the mountain, taking anything in its way. She'd watched footage of last year's brushfires, and she knew then that if not for the gate, someone could walk right in and wipe out all of Oak Canyon Estates with a single match — both the previous phase and this one. And the firestorm they would create in the process could take out entire neighborhoods at the base of the hill.

If the fire started at night, there might not be time to warn the residents down below, and then ...

She closed her eyes, refusing to think about the possibility.

Ron was saying, "Listen, Dad, tell you what." He left the table and crossed the room. "Holly and I are going to check the security fence around the back of the property. Just to be safe."

Dave seemed to relax at the idea. "Good. I'll call the alarm company and make sure everything's working fine on their end."

When they were outside, the door shut behind them, Ron offered her his arm. She took hold of it, and they found an easy pace as they started up the street toward the largest model. "Maybe the stress is getting to him." He gestured toward the row of homes. "The economy's still soft, and ... well, everything he has is wrapped up in these houses."

"They're insured, right?" Holly didn't worry herself about such details. Her concern was about their safety and the safety of homeowners in the area. Beyond that, her job was to sell houses, and she was ahead of projections, even with the weak economy.

"We have insurance, but the deductible's pretty high." He made a face like he was calculating something. "If we lost all these houses, the subs would get paid. But it'd put us under. Dad knows that."

The wind had died down, and only a gentle breeze rolled down from the top of the mountain through the high canyon development. Holly swallowed hard.

“That won’t happen. That’s why the security system and the gate were such good ideas.”

“Thank you.” He straightened his shoulders and gazed down at her.

She hadn’t meant it as a compliment, but if he took it that way, fine. They reached the end of the street, and he jogged up along the craggy dirt at the front of the end lot to a post that anchored the security fence along the backs of the houses. While he checked it, Holly studied him. He was soft around the middle, but tall with broad shoulders. Most women her age would’ve found him attractive — if not overwhelmed by his physical presence, then because of his kindness and confidence and great success in business. Holly didn’t know exactly how much Ron Jacobs was worth, but it was a lot. Aside from his father, he owned several developments on the Valley floor, and a house that overlooked the ocean.

But the money didn’t matter to Holly. In fact, it was more of a detriment. Ron had clearly become comfortable in his life, satisfied with conquering the business world and acquiring houses and cars. A man like that could never really need her. Not the way she’d been needed once, a lifetime ago.

He jogged back to her, and as he reached her, he must’ve seen the doubt flickering in her eyes. She looked away, but it was too late.

“What’re you thinking?” He held out his arm again, and she took it.

This was how he always walked with her, the way cultured people showed affection, maybe. But it made Holly feel like she was pretending to be someone she wasn’t. She breathed in the sweet smell of the canyon and thought about putting him off, telling him she wasn’t thinking about anything. But the solitude of the moment and the beauty of the setting sun made her feel more transparent than usual. She lifted her eyes to his as they kept walking. “I guess I’m thinking that you must not need very much.” She smiled, keeping her tone even. “Since you already have everything you ever wanted.”

He didn’t react to her statement other than with the hint of a smile that played on his lips. He looked straight ahead, self-assurance spilling into his voice. “I have much, that’s true. Wealth and property.” He shrugged in an attempt to look humble. Then he stopped and faced her. “I earned everything I have, and I worked hard to get it. But lately,” he touched her chin. So far he hadn’t kissed her, and he made no attempt now. “Lately, all that pales to how it feels when I’m with you.” The breeze lifted the front of his hair and exposed his receding hairline. “Sometimes I feel like you’re the one, Holly.”

She tried not to squirm beneath his stare. “Really?”

“Yes.” He ran his thumb along her brow. “The one with whom I can share all I’ve built, all I’ve made of myself.”

What about her feelings? she wanted to ask him. Had he thought about that? She silently warned herself that she was doing it again. Being critical of Ron for no reason. She smiled at him. “I like when you share your feelings with me.”

“See, that’s what I mean.” He grinned and continued walking, his elbow still extended for her. “You say something like that, and I feel like I’m alive.” They checked the post at the other end of the street, and when they reached the front door of the model home again, he turned to her. “This weekend, Holly? Can I take you out?”

Though Holly could see this offer coming, so far they hadn’t been on a date. They’d walked together and spent time at work together, and she could sense his interest. But this was the first step. She swallowed and tried to think fast. There wasn’t a single reason why she should tell him no. She felt her smile become shyer than before. “What did you have in mind?”

“How about I surprise you?” He leaned close and kissed her forehead. “Whatever I come up with for Saturday, how about you come with me to church Sunday morning?” He stepped back. “The eleven o’clock service?”

“Uh ...” What was wrong with her? Ron was perfect, right? Able to care for her beyond her wildest dreams, and he didn’t only want a date with her, he wanted to take her to church. What more could she ask for? “Yes, Ron ... that sounds lovely.”

But from that moment until her drive home that night, she wanted to wash her mouth out with soap. *That sounds lovely?* Had she really said that? There was nothing lovely about taking in a church service. Who was she kidding? That wasn’t how she talked or how she felt at all. The idea of going to church with Ron felt as phony as the picture of her walking alongside him, clinging to his elbow. If she couldn’t be herself around Ron, the weekend was doomed already.

She pressed the clicker on her car’s visor, and the security gate at her townhouse complex opened slowly. Holly tried to relax. Usually she liked coming home, liked leaving the demands of Oak Creak Estates behind her for an evening.

She had earned her degree in business and taken a job with Jacobs Development her senior year. Now she earned a considerable income, and she’d been able to purchase one of the new condos off Las Virgenes Road, just before Malibu Canyon. The view was pretty — though not the

breathhtaking panoramas she worked around every day. Mostly it was a great investment, a safe place to live close to work and with all the amenities she wanted in a home — security, a swimming pool, tennis courts, and a private gym. All that and her mom had a unit right around the corner from her.

But that night as she stepped into her house, she felt as empty as her feelings for Ron Jacobs. The phone rang just as she kicked off her heels, and she answered it on the third ring. “Hello?”

“Hi, honey.” It was her mother. “How was your day?”

She and her mom were closer now than they’d been back when she was growing up. Because of Alex’s parents, her mom had stopped drinking years ago and found what they’d been missing as a couple. But they only shared that special time for a few short years. After her dad’s sudden heart attack, her mother had been left alone. Holly’s older sister married five years ago, and she lived in Maryland with her husband and two sons. Finally, when it became clear to Holly’s mother that Holly wasn’t moving back to the East Coast, she sold her house in Staten Island and found a townhouse in the same development as Holly.

Her mom’s training was in nursing, and she found a position in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Humana West Hills Hospital. Between her job and her involvement at church, her mother kept busy. But there was still time for daily conversations and regular dinners throughout the week. Holly kicked back in her leather love seat and closed her eyes. “We had a threat today, someone saying they were going to set fire to the estates.”

“Holly, that’s terrible!” Her mother’s alarm was right up there with Dave’s.

“I know, but Ron reported the call to the police.” She tried to convince her mother and herself there was nothing to worry about. “Besides, we have the gate and the security system.”

“True.” Her mother sounded a little more at ease with the reminder. “So tell me about Ron? Anything coming of his attraction?”

“I think so.” She could talk to her mom about any topic, and Ron was no exception. She kept her voice upbeat, because she needed to give the idea of Ron a chance. She’d always been able to talk to her mom, and this was no exception. “He asked me out this weekend.”

“Really?” There was a smile in her mother’s tone. “And you said yes?”

“I did. I don’t know where we are going. He said he wants to surprise me.”

They talked a few minutes more about her conversation with Ron, how he was

beginning to wonder if maybe she was the one he was supposed to share his life with. She worked her way through all the details, but when she was finished, there was silence on the other end. “Mom?”

“I don’t hear it. The excitement in your voice.”

Holly felt the rush of defeat. “You know me too well.” She let her sigh linger over the phone line. “I should feel something, right? Wouldn’t you say?”

“Well, that’s just it, honey. In the movies and in storybooks, love comes at us all at once, like a stunning rainbow across an otherwise dreary sky. But that’s not always how it is in real life.” She hesitated. “In real life, love takes time. You need to get to know Ron and see his strengths, his weaknesses. Sometimes women in their mid-twenties are busy holding out for the magic of first love and missing the fact that they need to work at the relationships around them. Real love takes a lot of work, Holly.”

She didn’t know why exactly, but her mother’s talk depressed her. They made a plan to talk the next day, said their good-byes, and hung up. Without making a conscious decision, Holly wandered through the house to the place at her kitchen bar where she kept her leather workbag. The newspaper article was still tucked inside, and now she pulled it out. She opened it and spread it on the counter.

“Alex ... why can’t I stop thinking about you?” she whispered, as if by doing so she could keep from admitting the truth to herself.

The lighting was better here than it had been in her office, and she could make out his face more clearly than before. Not just his face, but his eyes — or the empty hard glint of darkness where his eyes used to be. She looked more closely. Those weren’t the eyes of the boy she’d fallen in love with. Not even close. She walked to the kitchen sink and poured herself a glass of milk.

Alex was right to send her away when he did. He was different then, and he still seemed different now. Changed forever by the tragedy of 9/11. She drank the milk and allowed her mother’s words to ring again in her mind. *In real life, love takes time* ... She set the glass down by the sink and stared at her image in the mirror that hung on the wall. Was that true? Did love really take time? Wasn’t it still possible that two people would meet and share a look or a smile that in a moment’s time would change both their lives?

She dismissed the idea. Her dishwasher needed unloading, and she set about the task. What else had her mother told her? Real love takes a lot of work, right? Wasn’t that it? She unloaded the glasses, moving them one at a time into the empty space in her cupboard. The trouble was, love hadn’t been that way between her and Alex. Not when they were kids. Love took no work

whatsoever. Relationships, yes. The logistics of blending two lives into one, and finding the beauty and laughter in the ordinary — that part took work for anyone.

But love?

With her and Alex, love had been everything her mother said only happened in movies and storybooks. It had come all in a rush and left the most brilliant rainbow behind. A heaviness settled over her heart. The house was too quiet. She crossed the living room and slipped in a Barry Manilow CD. Her father's favorite. The first haunting strains of "Even Now" filled the empty places not only in her townhouse, but in her heart. *Even now ... when I have come so far ... I wonder where you are ... I wonder why it's still so hard without you ...*

Tears stung her eyes and made it hard for her to see the newspaper still spread across her kitchen counter. She didn't miss the man Alex had become, whoever he was. But her heart was still ripped apart over losing the boy he'd been. Because somewhere deep inside him, that boy was still alive. Holly would bet everything on that fact, but there was one problem.

She would never have the chance to find out.

Hoofstuk 11

Holly is net op pad huis toe toe Dave en Ron vinnig by die deur inkom, hulle stemme ernstig. Sy gaan sit dadelik weer by haar lessenaar sodat sy hulle beter kan hoor. Wat dit ook al is wat hulle bespreek, dit klink of Dave kwaad is vir sy seun.

"Jy kan so iets nie ligtelik opneem nie."

"Dit is nie asof ek dit ligtelik opneem nie. Ek het die polisie gebel, het ek nie?"

"'n Dreigement van brandstigting? Ons behoort die hele polisiemag hier te hê om die plek te patroleer. Iemand kan seerkry."

Ron probeer duidelik 'n bakleiery vermy. Sy stem is nou laer. "Haal diep asem, Pa. Regtig. Dit was net 'n telefoonoproep."

"Noudat omgewingsterroriste besig is om planne te beraam teen mense soos ek en jy." Vrees neem beheer oor Holly. Sy staan op en huiwer voordat sy na die volgende vertrek beweeg. "Het jy 'n oproep oor brandstigting gekry?"

Ron kyk na haar asof hy haar wil kalmeer. "Dit was niks nie. Dit het soos 'n klomp kinders geklink."

"Kinders maak nie sulke dreigemente nie." Dave het 'n potlood in sy hand, en hy kap teen die rand van die tafel. Sy gesigsuitdrukking wys hoe ernstig hy is. "Wanneer het jy die polisie gebel?"

“Die oomblik toe ek die foon neergesit het.” Ron leun terug in sy stoel. As hy bekommerd was oor die oproep laat hy dit glad nie blyk nie. “Hulle het die dreigement aangeteken en belowe om meer gereeld hierdie gebied te patroleer.”

“Hier is immers ’n hek en die sekuriteitstelsel.” Holly wil nie kant kies nie, maar sy word altyd daardeur gekonfronteer. “Niemand gaan ’n brand stig terwyl ons hier is nie. En die hek is ’n kilometer hiervandaan.”

“Sy is reg.” Ron glimlag eers vir haar, en dan vir sy pa. “As hulle deur die hek ry of dit met die pad op sleep, sal hulle die sekuriteitsensors laat afgaan. Die polisie sal hier wees voordat hulle die bokant van die heuwel bereik.”

“Dit sal makliker wees om ’n ontwikkeling te vind waar hulle direk kan inry.” Holly wens hierdie soort ding nie vir enigiemand toe nie, maar dit maak haar uitsers bang om te dink so iets kan hier gebeur.

“Presies.” Ron kyk gerusstellend na sy pa. “Komaan, ontspan. Ons het goed hieroor nagedink. Ons het baie geld spandeer aan daardie hek en sekuriteitstelsel. Ons is veilig hierbo, maak nie saak wie daardie oproep gemaak het nie.”

Holly luister na Ron, en sy wil hom só graag glo. Die manier hoe die huise reg langs die canyon af lê, sal maak dat ’n vuur spoed optel en met die heuwel af voort woed, en alles in die proses verbrand. Sy het beeldmateriaal gesien van verlede jaar se veldbrande, en toe het sy geweet dat as dit nie vir die hek was nie, iemand maklik kan inkom en die hele Oak Canyon Estates met net een vuurhoutjie kan afbrand – die eerste fase sowel as hierdie een. En die vuurstorm wat dit in die proses sal veroorsaak, kan verskeie woonbuurte teen die voet van die heuwel vernietig.

Indien die vuur in die nag begin, sal daar dalk nie tyd wees om die inwoners aan die onderkant te waarsku nie, en dan ...

Sy maak haar oë toe en weier om aan die moontlikheid te dink.

Dan praat Ron weer. “Luister, Pa. Ek sê Pa wat.” Hy staan van die tafel af op en loop deur die vertrek. “Ek en Holly gaan die sekuriteitsheining aan die agterkant van die eiendom nagaan. Net vir ingeval.”

Dit lyk of Dave effens ontspan. “Goed. Ek sal die sekuriteitsmaatskappy bel om seker te maak alles werk reg aan hulle kant.”

Toe hulle buite is, gaan die deur agter hulle toe, en Ron hou sy arm uit na Holly. Sy vou hare daarom en hulle loop gemaklik met die straat op na die grootste huis. “Miskien is die spanning vir hom te veel.” Hy wys na die ry huise. “Die ekonomie is nie so sterk nie, en ... wel, alles wat hy besit, het hy in hierdie huise ingestee.”

“Dit is verseker, nie waar nie?” Holly bekommer haar nie oor sulke besonderhede nie. Vir haar is hulle veiligheid en dié van die huiseienaars in die area belangriker. Tog is dit haar werk om huise te verkoop, en sy het tot dusver meer verkoop as verwag, selfs met die swak ekonomie.

“Ons het versekering, maar die bybetalings is nogal hoog.” Op sy gesig kan ’n mens sien hy is besig om iets te bereken. “As ons al hierdie huise verloor, is

ons onderdeur. En my pa weet dit.”

Die wind is stiller, en daar is net ’n ligte briesie wat van die bopunt van die berg af beweeg deur die ontwikkeling wat hoog teen die canyon sit. Holly sluk hard. “Dit gaan nie gebeur nie. Dit is hoekom die sekuriteitstelsel en die hek so ’n goeie idee was.”

“Dankie.” Hy maak sy skouers reguit en kyk af na haar.

Sy het dit nie as ’n kompliment bedoel nie, maar as hy so dink, is dit seker maar reg so. Hulle is nou aan die bopunt van die straat en hy draf met die grondpad wat voor die laaste ry huise verbyloop na ’n paal aan die agterkant van die huise wat die sekuriteitsheining anker. Terwyl hy dit nagaan, kyk Holly na hom. Hy is nie brandmaer nie, maar lank met breë skouers. Die meeste vroue van haar ouderdom sal hom aantreklik vind – as hulle nie deur sy teenwoordigheid oorweldig word nie. ’n Teenwoordigheid wat spreek van vriendelikheid en selfvertroue, en die groot sukses wat hy al as sakeman behaal het. Holly weet nie presies hoeveel Ron Jacobs besit nie, maar hy is ryk. Buiten vir sy pa se eiendom besit hy verskeie ontwikkelings in die valleie en ’n huis wat oor die see uitkyk.

Maar die geld maak nie vir Holly saak nie. Om die waarheid te sê, dit is eerder ’n nadeel. Ron is duidelik gemaklik met sy lewe, tevrede met die feit dat hy die sakewêreld oorwin het en huise en motors besit. ’n Man soos hy het haar nie regtig nodig nie. Nie soos sy lank terug, ’n leeftyd terug, nodig gehad is nie.

Hy draf terug na haar toe en toe hy naby is, sien hy die onsekerheid in haar oë. Sy kyk weg, maar dit is te laat.

“Waarom dink jy?” Hy hou weer sy arm na haar toe uit, en sy vou hare daarom.

Dit is hoe hy altyd saam met haar loop, miskien hoe gekultiveerde mense hul liefde wys. Maar dit laat Holly voel sy gee voor sy is iemand wat sy nie is nie. Sy asem die soet geur van die canyon in en dink daaraan om nie vir hom te sê wat haar pla nie. Maar aangesien dit ’n oomblik is wat hom nie gereeld voordoet nie, en as gevolg van die mooi sonsondergang, voel sy eerliker as gewoonlik. Sy lig haar oë na syne terwyl hulle aanhou stap. “Ek is seker maar net besig om te dink dat jy nie baie nodig het nie.” Sy glimlag, sonder om haar stemtoon te verander. “Aangesien jy reeds alles het wat jy nog ooit wou gehad het.”

Hy reageer op haar stelling met slegs ’n geringe teken van ’n glimlag wat aan sy mondhoëke trek. Hy kyk reg voor hom, en sy stem klink selfversekerd. “Ek het baie, dis waar. Rykdom en eiendom.” Hy haal sy skouers op in ’n poging om nederig te lyk. Dan gaan staan hy en kyk na haar. “Ek verdien alles wat ek het, ek het hard gewerk daarvoor. Maar deesdae,” hy raak aan haar ken. Sover het hy haar nog nie gesoen nie, en hy probeer ook nie nou nie. “Deesdae is dit niks in vergelyking met hoe ek voel wanneer ek by jou is nie.” Die briesie waai deur sy kuif en wys sy haarlyn wat besig is om terug te skuif. “Soms voel ek dat jy die een is, Holly.”

Sy probeer om nie inmekaar te krimp terwyl hy na haar staan nie. “Regtig?”
“Ja.” Hy vee met sy duim oor haar wenkbrou. “Die een met wie ek alles wat ek opgebou het, alles wat ek geword het, kan deel.”

Wat van haar gevoelens? wil sy vir hom vra. Het hy al daaraan gedink? Sy waarsku haarself dat sy al weer besig is om dit te doen. Om sonder enige rede krities te wees teenoor Ron. Sy glimlag vir hom. “Ek hou daarvan as jy jou gevoelens met my deel.”

“Sien, dit is wat ek bedoel.” Hy glimlag en hou aan loop, sy elmboog steeds vir haar uitgesteek. “Jy sê iets soos dit, en ek voel lewend.” Hulle gaan die hoekpaal aan die ander kant van die straat na, en toe hulle weer by die voordeur van die skouhuis kom, draai hy na haar toe. “Kan ek jou hierdie naweek uitneem, Holly?”

Hoewel Holly sy uitnodiging sien kom het, was hulle tot dusver nog nie uit op ’n afspraak nie. Hulle het saam gaan stap en saam tyd deurgebring by die werk, en sy kon aanvoel hy stel belang. Maar hierdie is die eerste stap. Sy sluk en probeer vinnig dink. Daar is geen rede hoekom sy vir hom moet nee sê nie. Sy voel hoe haar glimlag nou skamer raak as voorheen. “Wat het jy in gedagte?”

“Hoekom verras ek jou nie?” Hy leun vorentoe en soen haar voorkop. “Ek sal iets vir Saterdag beplan, maar wat daarvan as jy Sondagoggend saam met my kerk toe gaan?” Hy tree terug. “Die diens om elfuur?”

“Hmm ... ” Wat is fout met haar? Ron is perfek, nie waar nie? Hy is in staat om vir haar te sorg, beter as waarvan sy kan droom. En hy wil nie net saam met haar op ’n afspraak gaan nie, hy wil haar saam vat kerk toe. Wat meer wil sy hê? “Ja, Ron ... dit klink lieflik.”

Maar van daardie oomblik af totdat sy die aand huis toe ry, wil sy haar mond met seep uit was. *Dit klink lieflik.* Het sy dit regtig gesê? Daar is niks lieflik daaraan om kerk toe te gaan nie. Wie flous sy? Dit is nie hoe sy praat of hoe sy voel nie. Die idee om saam met Ron kerk toe te gaan, het so vals gevoel soos die prentjie waar sy langs hom loop, haar arm om syne gevleg. As sy nie haarself kan wees in Ron se geselskap nie, hou die naweek reeds niks goed in nie.

Sy druk die knoppie op die afstandbeheer en die sekuriteitshek by die kompleks waar sy bly, gaan stadig oop. Holly probeer ontspan. Gewoonlik hou sy daarvan om huis toe te kom, om die eise van Oak Creek Estates vir ’n aand agter te laat.

Sy het haar besigheidsgraad verwerf en in haar laaste jaar by Jacobs Development begin werk. Nou verdien sy ’n redelike salaris, en dit het haar in staat gestel om een van die nuwe huise langs Las Virgenes-weg, voor Malibu Canyon, te koop. Die uitsig is mooi – hoewel nie die asemrowende panoramas waar sy elke dag werk nie. Dit is hoofsaaklik ’n groot belegging, ’n veilige plek om te bly na aan die werk, met al die geriewe wat sy graag wil hê – sekuriteit, ’n swembad, tennisbane en ’n privaat gimnasium. En boonop bly haar ma in die eenheid net om die draai van haar.

Toe sy in haar huis in stap, voel sy so leeg soos haar gevoelens vir Ron Jacobs. Die telefoon lui net toe sy haar skoene uitskop, en sy antwoord toe dit vir die derde keer lui. “Hallo?”

“Haai, liefeling.” Dit is haar ma. “Hoe was jou dag?”

Sy en haar ma se verhouding is deesdae sterker as toe sy ’n kind was. Te danke aan Alex se ouers het haar ma jare gelede opgehou drink, en sy en Holly se pa het gevind wat hulle as paartjie gemis het. Hulle het daardie spesiale tyd slegs vir ’n paar kort jare gedeel. Haar pa is skielik aan ’n hartaanval oorlede en haar ma is alleen agtergelaat. Holly se ouer suster is vyf jaar gelede getroud, en sy bly in Maryland saam met haar man en twee seuns. Toe Holly se ma uiteindelik besef sy gaan nie terugtrek Ooskus toe nie, het sy haar huis in Staten Island verkoop en ’n huis in dieselfde ontwikkeling as Holly s’n gekry.

Haar ma is as verpleegster opgelei en sy het ’n pos by die Neonatale Intensiewesorgeenheid van Humana West Hills-hospitaal gekry. Haar ma se werk en betrokkenheid by die kerk hou haar besig. Maar daar is steeds tyd vir hulle om daagliks te praat en vir gereelde aandetes deur die week. Holly lê terug in haar leerstoel en maak haar oë toe. “Ons het vandag ’n dreigement ontvang. Iemand wat sê hulle gaan ’n brand stig by die landgoed.”

“Holly, dit is verskriklik!” Haar ma is net so geskok soos Dave.

“Ek weet, maar Ron het die oproep by die polisie aangemeld.” Sy probeer haar ma en haarself oortuig dat daar niks is om oor bekommerd te wees nie.

“Buitendien, daar is ’n hek en ’n sekuriteitstelsel.”

“Dit is waar.” Haar ma klink meer op haar gemak toe sy daaraan herinner word. “Vertel my van Ron? Het daar al iets van sy belangstelling gekom?”

“Ek dink so.” Sy kan met haar ma oor enigiets praat, selfs oor Ron. Sy hou haar stem lig, want sy moet Ron ’n kans gee. Sy kon nog altyd met haar ma praat, en vandag is geen uitsondering nie.

“Hy het my gevra om die naweek saam met hom op ’n afspraak te gaan.”

“Regtig?” Sy kan die glimlag in haar ma se stem hoor. “En het jy ja gesê?”

“Ja, ek het. Ek weet nie waarheen ons gaan nie. Hy het gesê hy wil my verras.”

Hulle praat nog ’n paar minute oor haar gesprek met Ron, hoe hy begin wonder of sy nie miskien die een is met wie hy sy lewe wil deel nie. Sy vertel haar ma alles in die fynste besonderhede, maar toe sy klaar is, is dit stil aan die ander kant. “Ma?”

“Ek hoor nie opwinding in jou stem nie.”

Holly voel sleg. “Ma ken my te goed.” Sy laat haar sug oor die telefoonlyn draal. “Ek behoort iets te voel, nie waar nie? Of wat sê Ma?”

“Wel, dit is presies dit, liefeling. In flieks en in storieboeke tref die liefde ons ewe skielik, soos ’n pragtige reënboog teen grou lug. Maar dit werk nie altyd so in die regte lewe nie.” Sy aarsel. “In die regte lewe neem die liefde tyd. Jy moet eers vir Ron leer ken, sy sterk en swak punte. Soms hou vroue in hul twintigs so vas aan die wonder van eerste liefde en sien nie raak dat hulle aan

hulle verhoudings moet werk nie. Ware liefde verg baie werk, Holly.” Sy weet nie regtig hoekom nie, maar haar ma se preek maak haar depressief. Hulle reël ’n kuiertjie vir die volgende dag, sê totsiens en sit die telefoon neer. Sonder om bewustelik daaroor te besluit, wandel Holly deur die huis na die plek in haar kombuis waar sy haar leertas vir werk bêre. Die koerantberig is steeds daarbinne, en nou haal sy dit uit. Sy maak dit oop en sit die koerant op die toonbank neer.

“Alex ... hoekom kan ek jou nie vergeet nie?” Sy fluister, asof sy haarself só kan keer om die waarheid te erken.

Die ligte hier is sterker as dié in haar kantoor, en sy kan sy gesig nou duideliker sien as voorheen. Nie net sy gesig nie, maar sy oë – of die leë, harde donkertes waar sy oë altyd was. Sy bestudeer dit van nader. Dit is nie die oë van die seun op wie sy verlief geraak het nie. Glad nie. Sy loop in die rigting van die wasbak, en gooi dan vir haarself ’n glas melk in.

Alex het die regte ding gedoen toe hy haar weggestuur het. Hy was toe anders en hy lyk steeds anders. Die tragedie van 11 September het hom vir altyd verander. Sy drink die melk en laat haar ma se woorde toe om in haar gedagtes te eggo. *In die regte lewe neem die liefde tyd ...* Sy sit die glas in die wasbak neer en staar na haar spieëlbeeld in die spieël teen die muur. Is dit waar? Neem die liefde werklik tyd? Is dit nie steeds moontlik dat twee mense mekaar kan ontmoet en na mekaar kan kyk of vir mekaar kan glimlag en dit dan hulle al twee se lewens verander nie?

Sy verskuif haar aandag na haar skottelgoedwasser wat sy moet uitpak en sy begin dadelik. Wat het haar ma nog vir haar gesê? Ware liefde verg baie werk, nie waar nie? Was dit wat sy gesê het? Sy pak die glase uit, pak hulle een vir een in die leë kombuiskas. Die probleem is, die liefde tussen haar en Alex was nooit so nie. Nie toe hulle jonk was nie. Die liefde het geen werk geverg nie. Verhoudings, ja. Die logistiek om twee lewens te verweef en die skoonheid en genot in die alledaagse te vind – almal moet aan daardie deel werk.

Maar liefde?

Haar en Alex se liefde was alles wat haar ma gesê het net in fliëks en storieboeke gebeur. Dit het alles baie vinnig gebeur en die pragtigste reënboog agtergelaat. Dit voel of iets swaar op haar hart druk. Die huis is te stil. Sy loop na die ander kant van die leefvertrek en laat speel ’n CD van Barry Manilow. Haar pa se gunsteling. Die eerste klanke van “Even Now” vul nie net die leë ruimtes in haar huis nie, maar ook in haar hart. *Even now ... when I have come so far ... I wonder where you are ... I wonder why it's still so hard without you* ...

Trane brand in haar oë en maak dit vir haar moeilik om die koerant te sien wat steeds op haar kombuiskas lê. Sy mis nie die man wat Alex geword het nie, wie hy ook al is. Maar haar hart is steeds uitmekaargeskeur omdat sy die seun wat hy was, verloor het. Want êrens, diep binne-in hom, skuil daardie seun steeds. Holly is doodseker daarvan. Daar is egter een probleem: Sy sal nooit die kans hê om uit te vind nie.

TWELVE

Only two days had passed, and already Alex was going crazy without his job. He understood the department's policy. Being responsible for the death of another human being was something that weighed on him more than he could've known. No matter how badly he wanted to rid the streets of crime, he didn't want to kill anyone.

So maybe a little time off was a good thing. But still he couldn't get past the fact that he felt like he was being punished.

He was almost to Clay and Jamie's house, ready for a night of lasagna and listening — which was what he liked best about these dinners. By listening, he had learned to feel for the families who gathered at the Michaels' house, and by feeling he could keep his focus. Fighting crime, so that one more person wouldn't feel the pain of losing someone to another lousy bad guy.

The sun was still bright in the sky, and Alex wore his darkest Oakleys. He tried to imagine how different life would be this very night at Clay's house if the gunman had killed him, if the shot had hit him in the neck or if it had pierced his bulletproof vest. Jamie knew nothing of the pain that would've consumed her that day if Clay had never again walked through the front door. Her heart would've been torn apart by a bullet fired half a city away, and the kids? Neither Sierra nor CJ would ever be the same again.

Satisfaction warmed his veins and cast a calm over the stormy seas in his soul. He never intended to kill a suspect, but in this case Clay was still alive because Alex had taken the right action. His determination to keep people from the pain that had torn his family apart was working.

He steeled his gaze at the road ahead of him.

While he was off work, he would keep an eye on the REA. The meeting was tonight — after another delay, according to Owl. Alex could hardly wait. He would have dinner with his friends, and then leave earlier than usual. He had his disguise in the trunk — dark sweatshirt and sweatpants, a ski mask, and an ankle holster so he could add a third gun to the ones he'd be wearing around his waist and thigh.

The others were all there when Alex parked his truck and took Bo from the backseat. As the two of them headed up the walkway, he could hear them already laughing, sharing stories about kids or something funny that had happened. Alex wrapped Bo's leash around the porch post and hooked it so it was secure.

Bo gave him a tired look, as if to say, "Really? I'm staying out here by myself again?"

"Not for long, boy ... just an hour or two." Alex sat on the step beside the dog and patted his head. Light from the setting sun made it easier to see the small missing piece in Bo's ear, the place where a bullet had nicked him during a drug bust a few months ago. Neighbors had reported drug activity, and two squad cars had been dispatched to the scene.

The missing piece wasn't much, maybe a quarter-inch. But it told the story of Bo's uncanny ability as a police dog, and his unending loyalty. Alex ran his knuckles against the side of Bo's face. Two years ago when the dog had come home from the Netherlands, green with only basic training, his eyes were forever earnest and willing, always giving Alex the same message. Sort of an, "Okay, boss ... tell me what to do ... tell me what to do."

But that look had long since been replaced by one of utter control and confidence. Alex trusted Bo with his life now, no question. He and Bo had spent more than eight hundred hours training together, finding bad guys in empty buildings and alleys, tracking would-be perpetrators through chest-deep marshes and thick swamps and dense brush. Since Bo had no police training in Europe, his training was all in English. But for every verbal command, he was equally adept with a hand signal or physical cue.

Alex looped his arm around Bo's neck and leaned against him. A K9 officer never went anywhere without his dog, so after two years the bond between them only intensified the effectiveness of their training. It was part of what made them so good at catching crooks. Alex had read somewhere that for a K9 deputy, his dog was his friend, his partner, and his defender. For Bo? Alex rubbed the dog's ear again. For Bo, Alex was his life, his leader, his everything.

After 9/11, Alex withdrew from people, all people. Working with a police dog was the only crime fighting Alex ever wanted to do — from the moment he made his decision to be a deputy. Not only did the job give him a reason to be a loner, to focus on the bad guys, but also K9 teams were always on the frontlines, the first guys into a building or chasing down a suspect. No deputy could have a better partner. Alex's intense training on his off hours, his determination and focus, were sometimes only an attempt to match Bo's complete devotion.

The smell of lasagna drifted onto the front porch. Alex patted the dog one last time as he stood. “You’re a good boy, Bo. Good dog.”

Bo wagged his tail and, at Alex’s hand command, stretched out his front legs and lay down on the porch. He watched Alex walk to the front door and inside the house, and Alex smiled to himself. Whether he was in the house a few minutes or a few hours, Bo would keep his eyes on that front door the whole time. Watching for him, waiting.

Alex found Clay in the kitchen slicing garlic bread. “Brady, look at you.” He tried to look serious, but there was a light in his eyes that belied the fact. “You’re turning into a slacker.”

“Sir?” Alex leaned against the nearest kitchen counter and crossed his arms.

“Your suntan.” He took a nearby dish towel and flicked it in Alex’s direction. “You asked me what to bring, and I told you.” He shook his head in a mock show of disappointment. “So what’d you do, spend the last two days thinking about the REA?”

Clay was kidding, so Alex didn’t dare tell him that he was dead-on. He forced a yawn. “You know, Sarge ... caught up on my sleep, lazed around in the recliner.”

Clay raised an eyebrow. “Why do I doubt that?”

A buzzer went off near the stove, and Clay tossed Alex a pair of hot pads. “Get the lasagna.” He carried the plate of sliced bread to the dining room. “Set it on the stove.”

As Alex took the glass dish from the oven, he caught a glimpse of Jamie and Sierra in the backyard. They were talking to the others, showing off something in their vegetable garden. Funny, Alex thought. Sierra could easily be Eric’s daughter, something about the shape of her face, or her eyes, maybe.

The lasagna needed a few minutes to cool, and after everyone had served their plates they gathered in the backyard again. This time Jamie had set up a card table for the smaller kids, and another one for the teens. Someone always prayed before the group ate, and tonight Clay took the lead.

“Dear God, we gather here as friends and family, grateful for Your love and provision. Thank You for this food and the hands that prepared it.” He paused. “And we ask You, Lord, to help us lean on You and not on our own understanding. In everything we do. Amen.”

A round of hearty *amens* followed, but Alex had the sudden urge to excuse himself from the table and spend the meal out front with Bo. Why had Clay

added that last part? Alex had a feeling the words were directed straight at him. He lifted his eyes slowly, glancing at the others and making sure no one was staring his way. Only then did he let the words hit their mark. They had to be intended for him. Everyone else around the three tables already relied fully on God. He was the only one who leaned on his own understanding.

Alex took a piece of lasagna and kept his thoughts to himself. Clay had never talked to him about God, not directly, anyway. Probably because it was clear where Alex stood — he wasn't interested. Either way, he didn't want Clay using tonight to get into a discussion about dependence on God. He was two hours from meeting the Owl, something he'd worked out all on his own. A talk about needing God was the last thing he wanted.

There were no awkward silences with this group, which was one reason Alex liked coming. As soon as everyone was served, the conversations around him picked up. Josh Michaels was boasting about taking on the rest of the group in the basketball game Around the World, and laughing about the unlikely possibility that Sierra would make it past the first two shots. To her credit, Sierra was holding her own, giggling and promising to show them all wrong.

At the adult table, Joe was launching into a story about little Will and the family goldfish bowl. He dragged a napkin across his mouth. "So all along we've known Will has a fondness for fish, right?" He kept his voice low enough that Will and the other little kids couldn't hear him. "I mean a real fondness."

"He regularly drags his blanket from his bedroom and curls up for a nap right beside the fishbowl." Wanda made a face that suggested Will was a few crayons short of a box. "The sort of fondness where he talks to the fish, you know what I'm saying?"

"Anyway, so yesterday Wanda and Will come in from a trip to the market, and the goldfish are gone."

"Both of them?" Laura set her fork down, taken in by the story.

"Both." Wanda waved her hand in the air. "Disappeared."

"So Wanda looks at Will and points to the fishbowl, and Will walks a little closer." Joe leaned in so the others could hear. "Then he turns those big brown eyes back up at her and smiles. 'Fish sleeping,' he says."

Jamie jumped back and bit her lip. "No!"

"Yes!" Wanda glanced at Will, busy eating his dinner ten feet away.

"Those fish were sleeping, all right."

“So Wanda marches Will upstairs, and sure enough, there were the goldfish right smack on Will’s pillow, blankets pulled up all nice and snug.”

For the flash of a moment, Alex caught himself yearning for the life these three couples shared. He glanced at Will and CJ and Lacey and imagined what it would be like if he were a father, if one of the little ones at the next table belonged to him. Then, without warning, a memory came to life. He and his dad, sitting beside each other at the table after dinner one Thanksgiving. His mom must’ve been in the other room, because it was just the two of them, and his dad leaned back in his chair and put an arm around Alex’s shoulders. “Of all the things I’m thankful for,” he messed his fingers through Alex’s hair and grinned at him, “you’re at the top of the list. You know why?”

“Why?”

“Because I love being a dad.” His father’s eyes grew more serious. “I love being *your* dad.”

Even with night falling and the smell of sweet wildflowers in the late summer air, even with the reassuring pressure of the gun against his waist and the sound of the voices all around him, Alex could still see the way his dad looked at him that Thanksgiving Day. He blinked and tuned back into the conversation. Clay was asking if Will understood, if he’d learned anything from the fish tragedy.

Wanda rolled her eyes. “Yeah, we all learned something. Apparently, we need to read that boy the book of Genesis. The part where God created water so the fish would have a place to live.”

A round of muffled laughter passed over the table, and Eric looked from Wanda to Joe. “Let me guess, the Reynolds house has a couple of new goldfish.”

“Wanda took Will to pick ‘em out, so that she could show him how all the fish in the store were in water — not wrapped in blankets.”

Alex smiled at the story and pushed his fork through his salad. The food was good, but he wasn’t hungry, and he was struggling to stay focused on the conversation. What if Owl somehow knew he was a cop? The meeting could be a setup, and in his zeal to catch the REA, he could walk straight into a trap. He had to consider the idea, the way he’d been trained to consider all possibilities.

He took a bite of lasagna and looked up. As he did, he caught Jamie looking at him. Not just with a curious glance or incidental look, but really studying him. As if she knew he wasn’t truly there tonight. She locked eyes with him for a

second or two, and then she turned back to the conversation. Something about Laura and Eric's little girl, Lacey.

Between Clay's prayer and Jamie's strange way of watching him, Alex had a feeling about tonight. The group wasn't just including him in another dinner; they were worried about him. Loner sheriff's deputy Alex Brady, unable to process his feelings about shooting a bad guy. Alex finished his meal and quietly surveyed the others. Or maybe not. Maybe the things he was feeling were only in his imagination. But either way, he didn't belong here tonight.

He had an appointment to keep.

The meal was still going on, and Alex didn't need to leave for another half hour, but he needed time alone, time to think about the task ahead of him. As soon as the timing felt right, Alex excused himself and went out onto the porch with Bo.

He sat next to his dog and stared into the fading sunset. What was it about being here, the way it both drew him and confused him? No matter what fleeting thoughts had descended on him during dinner, he didn't want to be a father. Far from it. There was no room in his life for that kind of love. First, because he was incapable of loving that way, and second because he was driven to fight crime with every breath, with all his time and energy.

He ran his hand along Bo's side. Being here stirred feelings in him he never had otherwise. Questions about what it would've been like if he hadn't sent Holly away. Because if his ability to love was truly dead, then how could he explain the sensation that surrounded him even in this very moment — the feel of his dad's arm around his shoulders?

Hoofstuk 12

Daar is slegs twee dae verby en Alex is alreeds besig om mal te raak, aangesien hy nie werk toe kan gaan nie. Hy verstaan die polisie se beleid. Om verantwoordelik te wees vir die dood van 'n ander persoon, is iets wat swaar op sy gemoed druk, meer as wat hy gedink het. Maak nie saak hoe graag hy misdaad van die strate af wil hou nie, hy wil niemand doodmaak nie.

So miskien is 'n bietjie vrye tyd 'n goeie ding. Maar hy kan steeds nie verby die feit kom dat dit voel of hy gestraf word nie.

Hy is op pad na Clay en Jamie se huis, reg vir 'n aand van lasagne en om te luister – dit wat hy die meeste geniet tydens hierdie aandetes. Deur te luister het hy geleer hoe om meegevoel te hê vir die gesinne wat by die Michaelse se huis bymekaarkom, en as gevolg van die gevoelens behou hy sy fokus. Om misdaad te bestry sodat daar nie nog iemand is wat die pyn hoef te ervaar om iemand te verloor as gevolg van 'n gemene misdadiger nie.

Die son skyn steeds helder en Alex het sy donkerste Oakleys op. Hy probeer homself voorstel hoe anders die lewe vanaand by Clay se huis sou wees as die gewapende man hom geskiet het, as die skoot hom in die nek getref het of deur sy koeëlvaste baadjie geskeur het. Jamie weet niks van die pyn wat sy daardie dag sou ervaar het as Clay nooit weer by die voordeur ingeloop het nie. Haar hart sou uitmekaargeskeur gewees het deur die koeël wat iewers ver in die stad geskiet is. En die kinders? Nie Sierra of CJ sou ooit weer dieselfde gewees het nie.

Genoegdoening vul sy are en maak die stormagtige see in sy siel stil. Dit is nooit sy doel om 'n verdagte dood te maak nie, maar in hierdie geval is Clay steeds lewend omdat Alex die regte stappe geneem het. Sy vasberadenheid om mense van die pyn te weerhou wat sy gesin uitmekaargeskeur het, werk.

Hy staar na die pad voor hom.

Terwyl hy nie werk nie, sal hy 'n ogie hou op die ROA. Die ontmoeting is vanaand – na nog 'n terugslag, volgens Uil. Alex kan nie wag nie. Hy sal aandete saam met sy vriende geniet en dan vroeër as gewoonlik loop. Hy het sy vermomming in die bak – 'n donker sweetpakbaadjie en -broek, 'n ski-masker, en 'n pistoolsak vir sy enkel sodat hy saam met die gewere om sy middel en bobeen, 'n derde geweer kan hê.

Die ander is al daar toe Alex sy motor parkeer en Bo agter uithaal. Toe hy en Bo met die tuinpaadjie langs stap, kan hy hoor hoe hulle reeds lag en stories vertel oor die kinders of iets snaaks wat gebeur het. Alex draai Bo se leiband om die stoep se paal en maak seker dit is vas.

Bo kyk moeg na hom, asof hy sê: “Regtig? Bly ek al weer hier op my eie?”

“Nie vir lank nie, my hond ... net 'n uur of twee.” Alex gaan sit op die trappie langs die hond en vryf sy kop. Die lig van die son wat ondergaan, maak dit makliker om die plek te sien waar 'n stukkie van Bo se oor weg is, die plek waar 'n koeël 'n kepie gemaak het 'n paar maande gelede toe hulle mense vir dwelms aangekeer het. Bure het gerapporteer dat daar dwelms gebruik word en twee polisiemotors is na die toneel gestuur.

Dit is 'n klein deeltjie van sy oor wat weg is, miskien so 'n halwe sentimeter. Maar dit vertel die storie van Bo se onheilspellende vermoë as polisie hond, en sy loyaliteit. Alex vryf met sy kneukels teen die kant van Bo se kop. Toe die hond twee jaar gelede vanaf Nederland gekom het met slegs die basiese opleiding, was sy oë altyd ernstig en gewillig, het dit altyd dieselfde boodskap aan Alex oorgedra. Amper asof dit sê: “Goed, baas ... sê vir my wat om te doen ... sê vir my wat om te doen.”

Daardie uitdrukking is egter al lank terug vervang met een van totale beheer en selfvertroue. Alex vertrou Bo nou ongetwyfeld met sy lewe. Hy en Bo het al meer as agt honderd uur se opleiding saam deurgebring; om skelms in leë geboue en gangetjies te kry, om misdadigers te vind deur diep moerasse, nat vleilande en digte bosse. Aangesien Bo geen polisie-opleiding in Europa gehad het nie, is al sy opleiding in Engels gedoen. Maar vir elke verbale bevel ken hy ook 'n handgebaar of teken.

Alex vou sy arm om Bo se nek en leun teen hom. 'n Polisieman van die honde-eenheid gaan nooit êrens heen sonder sy hond nie. Ná twee jaar het die band tussen hulle dus die effektiwiteit van hulle opleiding versterk. Dit is een van die redes hoekom hulle so goed is daarmee om skelms te vang. Alex het êrens gelees dat 'n polisieman van die honde-eenheid se hond sy vriend, kollega en beskermmer is. En vir Bo? Alex vryf weer die hond se oor. Alex is Bo se lewe, sy baas, sy alles.

Ná 11 September het Alex homself van mense onttrek, alle mense. Van die oomblik dat hy besluit het om 'n polisieman te word, was die enigste manier hoe Alex ooit misdaad wou beveg saam met 'n polisiehond. Nie net het die werk hom 'n rede gegee om 'n alleenloper te wees en op die skelms te fokus nie, maar spanne van die honde-eenheid is altyd op die voorpunt, die eerste ouens om 'n gebou te betree of 'n verdagte agterna te sit. Geen polisieman kan 'n beter kollega hê nie. Alex se intensiewe oefening gedurende sy vrye tyd, sy vasberadenheid en fokus, is soms net 'n poging om so toegewy te wees soos Bo.

Die reuk van lasagne bereik die voorstoep. Alex vryf die hond vir 'n laaste keer en staan op. "Jy is 'n goeie hond, Bo. 'n Goeie hond."

Bo waai sy stert en toe Alex met sy hand 'n bevel gee, strek hy sy voorbene voor hom uit en gaan lê op die stoep. Hy kyk hoe Alex na die voordeur toe loop en in die huis in gaan, en Alex glimlag. Of hy nou vir 'n paar minute of 'n paar uur in die huis gaan wees, Bo gaan die hele tyd na die voordeur bly kyk. Op die uitkyk wees vir hom, vir hom wag.

Alex kry vir Clay in die kombuis besig om knoffelbrood te sny. "Brady, kyk net na jou." Hy probeer ernstig lyk, maar die glinster in sy oë vertel 'n ander storie. "Jy is besig om 'n luiaard te word."

"Meneer?" Alex leun teen die naaste kombuiskas en vou sy arms.

"Hoekom is jy nie bruingebrand nie?" Hy tel 'n vadoek op en slaan Alex speels daarmee. "Jy het vir my gevra wat om te bring, en ek het vir jou gesê." Hy skud sy kop en maak of hy teleurgesteld is. "So waarmee hou jy jouself besig? Bring jy die afgelope twee dae deur deur oor die ROA te dink?"

Clay is besig om te spot; daarom kan Alex nie waag om vir hom te sê dat hy heeltemal reg is nie. Hy maak of hy gaap. "Ag, jy weet, Sersant ... ek het slaap ingehaal, en op die rusbank rondgelê."

Clay trek sy een wenkbrou op. "Hoekom glo ek jou nie?"

'n Klokke naby die stoof gaan af, en Clay gooi vir Alex 'n paar oondhandskoene. "Kry die lasagne." Hy dra die bord met gesnyde brood na die eetkamer. "Sit dit op die stoof neer."

Toe Alex die glasbak uit die oond haal, sien hy vir Jamie en Sierra in die agterplaas. Hulle is besig om met die ander te praat, spog met iets in hulle groentetuin. *Dis vreemd*, dink Alex. Sierra kan maklik Eric se kind wees, iets omtrent die vorm van haar gesig, of miskien haar oë.

Die lasagne moet eers vir 'n paar minute afkoel, en nadat almal opgeskep het, kom hulle weer in die agterplaas bymekaar. Hierdie keer het Jamie 'n tafeltjie

gedek vir die kleiner kindertjies, en 'n ander een vir die tieners. Iemand bid altyd voordat die groep eet, en vanaand is dit Clay se beurt.

“Ons almagtige God, ons is hier bymekaar as vriende en familie, dankbaar vir u liefde en versorging. Dankie, Here, vir hierdie kos en die hande wat dit voorberei het.” Hy bly 'n oomblik stil. “En ons vra U, Here, om in alles wat ons doen op U te vertrou en nie op onself nie. Amen.”

Daarop volg 'n paar opregte *amens*, maar Alex voel skielik hy wil homself verskoon en voor saam met Bo gaan eet. Hoekom het Clay daardie laaste deel bygevoeg? Dit voel vir Alex of die woorde net vir hom bedoel is. Hy lig sy oë stadig, en kyk na die ander om seker te maak niemand staar na hom nie. Eers toe kry die woorde vir hom ware betekenis. Dit moet op hom van toepassing wees. Almal om die drie tafels vertrou reeds volkome op God. Hy is die enigste een wat op homself staatmaak.

Alex vat 'n happie lasagne en dink daaroor na. Clay het nog nooit met hom oor God gepraat nie, nie direk nie, in elk geval. Miskien omdat dit duidelik is hoe Alex daaroor voel – hy stel nie belang nie. Maar dit maak nie saak nie, hy wil nie hê Clay moet vanaand gebruik om in 'n gesprek betrokke te raak oor vertrou op God nie. Oor twee uur ontmoet hy vir Uil, iets wat hy op sy eie beplan het. Om te praat oor die mens wat vir God nodig het, is die laaste ding wat hy wil hê.

Daar is geen ongemaklike stilte in hierdie groep nie en dit is een van die redes hoekom Alex daarvan hou om te kom. Toe almal begin eet, begin die geselsies om hom. Josh Michaels spog daarmee dat hy vir almal 'n ding of twee gaan wys wanneer hulle later basketbal gaan speel en lag oor die feit dat Sierra nie lank sal kan uithou nie. Maar Sierra giggel net en belowe om hulle almal verkeerd te bewys.

By die grootmense se tafel begin Joe 'n storie vertel oor klein Will en die gesin se visbak. Hy vee sy mond met 'n servet af. “Wel, ons het die hele tyd geweet Will hou van visse, nê?” Hy praat sag sodat Will en die ander kinders hom nie kan hoor nie. “En ek bedoel hy hou régtig van visse.”

“Hy vat gereeld sy kombers uit sy kamer en gaan lê in 'n bondeltjie reg langs die visbak.” Wanda trek haar gesig om te wys Will het nie al sy varkies op hok nie. “Hy hou so baie van die visse dat hy met hulle praat.”

“In elk geval, gister kom Wanda en Will terug van die winkels af en die goudvisse is weg.”

“Al twee van hulle?” Laura sit haar vurk neer, aangegryp deur die storie.

“Al twee.” Wanda waai met haar hand deur die lug. “Net verdwyn.”

“Wanda kyk toe na Will en wys na die visbak, en Will loop 'n bietjie nader.”

Joe leun vorentoe sodat die ander kan hoor. “Toe kyk hy met daardie groot bruin oë van hom op na haar, glimlag en sê: ‘Die vissies slaap.’”

Jamie ruk terug en byt op haar lip. “Nee!”

“Ja!” Wanda kyk na Will waar hy besig is om 'n entjie daarvandaan sy kos te eet.

“Daardie visse het inderdaad geslaap.”

“Wanda loop toe saam met Will die trap op, en sowaar, daar lê die goudvisse op Will se kussing, snoesig onder die komberse.”

Vir ’n oomblik vang Alex homself dat hy verlang na die lewe wat hierdie drie paartjies deel. Hy kyk na Will en CJ en Lacey en stel homself voor hoe dit sal wees om ’n pa te wees, as een van die kindertjies aan daardie tafel syne was. Dan, sonder enige waarskuwing, kry ’n herinnering lewe. Hy en sy pa sit langs mekaar aan tafel na aandete een Thanksgiving. Sy ma moes seker in ’n ander vertrek gewees het, want dit was net hulle twee. Sy pa het teruggesit in sy stoel en sy arm om Alex se skouers gesit. “Van al die dinge waarvoor ek dankbaar is,” hy het Alex se hare met sy vingers deurmekaargekrab, “is jy bo-aan die lysie. Weet jy hoekom?”

“Hoekom?”

“Want ek is mal daaroor om ’n pa te wees.” Sy pa se oë het ernstiger geword. “Ek is mal daaroor om jǒu pa te wees.”

Selfs al word dit nag en hang die reuk van blomme in die laatsomerlug, selfs al voel hy die geweer teen sy middel en die klank van stemme om hom, kan Alex hom steeds die manier voorstel waarop sy pa daardie Thanksgiving na hom gekyk het. Hy knip sy oë en luister weer na die gesprek. Clay vra of Will verstaan het, of hy enigiets uit die tragedie met die visse geleer het.

Wanda rol haar oë. “Ja, ons het almal iets geleer. Ons moet vir Will Genesis lees. Die deel waar God water geskep het sodat visse ’n plek kan hê om in te leef.”

Om die tafel klink ’n onderdrukte gelag op, en Eric kyk van Wanda na Joe. “Kom ek raai, die Reynolds-gesin het ’n nuwe paar goudvisse.”

“Wanda het vir Will gevat om hulle te kies, sodat sy hom kon wys dat al die visse in die winkel in water leef – en nie in komberse toegedraai is nie.”

Alex glimlag oor die storie en steek sy vurk in die slaai. Die kos is lekker, maar hy is nie honger nie, en hy sukkel om op die gesprek te konsentreer. Wat as Uil op die een of ander manier weet hy is ’n polisieman? Die ontmoeting kan ’n lokval wees, en hy kan hom lelik vasloop as gevolg van sy geesdrif om die ROA te vang. Hy moet die idee oorweeg, soos hy opgelei is om aan al die moontlikhede te dink.

Hy vat ’n happie lasagne en kyk op. Op daardie oomblik sien hy hoe Jamie vir hom kyk. Nie met ’n nuuskierige blik of per ongeluk nie, maar asof sy hom bestudeer. Asof sy weet sy kop is vanaand op ’n ander plek. Haar oë ontmoet syne vir ’n oomblik en dan begin sy met iemand praat. Iets oor Laura en Eric se dogtertjie, Lacey.

As gevolg van Clay se gebed en die vreemde manier waarop Jamie vir hom gekyk het, het Alex ’n snaakse gevoel oor vanaand. Die groep maak hom nie net deel van nog ’n aandete nie; hulle is bekommerd oor hom. Die eensame polisieman, Alex Brady, wat nie in staat is om sy gevoelens te hanteer nadat hy ’n misdadiger geskiet het nie. Alex eet klaar en sit stil na die ander en kyk. Of miskien nie. Miskien verbeel hy hom al hierdie dinge. Maar hoe dit ook al sy, hy moenie vanaand hier wees nie.

Hy het 'n afspraak om na te kom.

Die ander eet steeds, en Alex hoef eers oor 'n halfuur te ry, maar hy het tyd alleen nodig, tyd om na te dink oor die taak wat voorlê. Toe die tyd reg voel, verskoon Alex homself en gaan sit saam met Bo op die stoep.

Hy gaan sit langs sy hond en staar na die son wat ondergaan. Wat is so vreemd aan die gevoel om hier te wees, die manier hoe dit hom aantrek en terselfdertyd deurmekaar maak? Maak nie saak watter vlugtige gedagtes tydens ete by hom opgekom het nie, hy wil nie 'n pa wees nie. Allesbehalwe. Daar is nie plek in sy lewe vir daardie tipe liefde nie. Eerstens omdat hy nie in staat is om so lief te hê nie, en tweedens omdat hy gedryf voel om misdaad te beveg met alles wat hy het.

Hy vryf oor Bo se lyf. Om hier te wees, maak gevoelens in hom wakker wat hy andersins nooit gevoel het nie. Vrae oor wat sou gebeur het as hy nie vir Holly weggestuur het nie. Want as sy vermoë om lief te hê werklik dood is, hoe verduidelik hy dan die gevoel wat hy op die oomblik ervaar – die gevoel dat sy pa se arm om sy skouers is?

THIRTEEN

All through dinner, Jamie watched the young deputy at the opposite end of the table, and when he stood and excused himself, she took his action as her cue. She silently prayed, asking God for wisdom and the right words. Then at the next break in the conversation, she put her hand on Clay's shoulder. "I'll be right back."

He didn't have to ask where she was going. His eyes told her he already knew, and that he was hesitant about her determination to help Alex. Hesitant, but not opposed to it. They had talked a few more times about Jake's journal, and whether the situation with Alex was drawing her heart back to the grief she'd known after the terrorist attacks. Jamie had been honest with him, because she wasn't really sure if that was happening.

"I just know I have to help him," she'd told Clay last night. "Please ... understand, okay?"

In the end he gave her his promise. If she felt God was leading her to talk to Alex, to share what Jake had written in his journal, then so be it. She had his blessing. But his expression now told her he also had his doubts. Jamie would talk to him later. She tucked that assurance into the corner of her heart as she reached the front screen door and stared out. On impulse, she grabbed her camera. Photography was a new hobby for her, and she'd always wanted to take pictures of Bo. She made sure the camera had a fresh battery and an empty memory chip.

Alex was sitting against the house, one knee pulled up, his eyes distant and focused on some unseen person or place, as if he wasn't really there, but somewhere far, far off. His dog lay on the porch beside him, his head on his paws, and they both looked at her as she stepped out. Jamie lowered her camera and resisted the desire to turn and head immediately back to the table, back to the safe conversation about goldfish and children.

Help me, God ... give me the words. She took a step closer. "I got a new camera." She gave a lighthearted shrug. "Can I take a few pictures of you and Bo?"

Surprise registered in Alex's eyes. "Uh ... sure, I guess." He smiled, as if maybe he was relieved that she wasn't going to ask anything deeper.

She made casual talk about dinner and the kids as she grabbed a dozen shots of Alex with Bo, and of Bo by himself. "He's a beautiful dog."

"The best ever." Alex patted Bo's back. "No dog like him anywhere."

Jamie's heartrate picked up speed. Picture-taking could only last so long. She opened the door and set the camera down on the table just inside. When she came back out, she slipped her hands in her back pockets. "Can I join you for a minute?"

Alex looked immediately uncomfortable with the idea. Jamie knew he had no intention of letting his guard down around her, but she needed to try. It was a job she felt compelled by God to do.

Bo yawned and set his chin down on his paws again. Alex watched him, and then gave Jamie a nervous look. "Uh, actually ... I was coming back in. Just checking on Bo." He seemed to realize that his excuse sounded weak in light of the way she'd found him. "I guess ... I don't know, I got distracted."

Jamie's confidence grew. She lowered herself to the porch and sat cross-legged, facing him. "I'm sorry ... about the shooting."

"Yeah. It happens." Alex stroked the top of Bo's head, his eyes on his dog. "I don't really need time off, you know."

She thought about her years at St. Paul's Chapel, how driven she'd been never to miss a day in her quest to bring meaning to Jake's death. A car drove by and the distraction gave Jamie time to gather her courage. When it passed, her voice filled with a depth that hadn't been there before. "I understand, Alex. More than you know."

He looked at her, his eyes narrowed just enough that his unspoken question was as clear as if he'd said the words.

Jamie held his gaze. "I know about your father. How he died."

Alex's expression hardened. "I'm over it. A lot of people died that day."

"Including my first husband. He was FDNY." It still hurt to say the words. "He died in the Twin Towers."

For the first time since he had come into their lives, the walls around Alex's heart crumbled just a little. Jamie could see the change in his eyes. "You ... were married to a firefighter?"

“Yes.” She drew up her knees and hugged them to her chest. “His name was Jake Bryan.”

“How come ...” he turned his eyes straight ahead again. “... Clay never said anything?”

“Wanda too. Her husband was a firefighter in New York.” Alex sat straighter, his back rigid, eyes wide and unblinking. “I never ... I had no idea.” Slowly he regained some of his composure. “Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“The guys thought it would scare you off.” Jamie could feel the sadness in her half-smile. “Too much pain.”

He was quiet, processing the information. “So why tell me now? What brought you out here?”

Jamie breathed in slowly, allowing God to turn her thoughts into words. “For a long time, I’ve wondered whether your father might’ve known my first husband.” She looked out past the rooftops of the houses across the street. “Wanda and I have talked about it, and there was no connection between her husband and Jake. But I wasn’t sure about your father.”

“What would it matter?” The muscles in Alex’s jaw flexed. “They would still be gone.”

Bo must’ve heard a change in Alex’s tone. The dog lifted his head long enough to size up the conversation. When he was satisfied everything was okay, he stretched out again.

Jamie’s heart pounded harder than before, and she tried to find the right words. She wanted to tell him it mattered because the terrorists were still waging war seven years later, right here in Alex’s heart and soul. But she didn’t want to make him run. “My husband kept a journal. For years while he worked for the FDNY, he wrote about his thoughts and ... and the people he met.” She felt Jake’s loss like a knife that never quite dislodged from inside her. “He had a very strong faith.”

Alex released a quick, angry-sounding sigh and stood, restless. “Ma’am? I guess I don’t get it. Why are you telling me this?”

Bo lifted his head again, alert and ready, his eyes locked on his master.

“Call me Jamie.” Her tone remained kind, unshaken. She dropped her knees back to the cross-legged position. “Please sit back down. I have something to tell you.”

He paced a few steps toward the walkway, and then back again. “Ma’am ...

Jamie ...” He stopped, his struggle clearly intense. He spoke through tight jaws. “I don’t do this. I don’t talk about him.”

I feel You, God ... be with him, please. A quiet strength came over her, and she watched him, undeterred. “It won’t take long.” She motioned to the spot where Alex had been sitting. “Please.”

For a few seconds, it looked like Alex might call his dog and run off without another word. Instead he breathed a few times through his nose, the battle playing out in his expression until finally he came closer and slowly lowered himself back to his spot beside Bo. He pulled up both his knees and rested his forearms there. “Go ahead.”

She tried to imagine the massive twist of anger and pain that tied up the heart of the young man across from her. The same anger and pain that bound the hearts of countless people Jamie had talked to at St. Paul’s. She leaned closer. “The other day I looked through Jake’s journal. It was a long shot, but I had to know — whether Jake knew your dad or not. Whether they’d ever talked.”

Alex looked down at his dog and waited.

“I found an entry, an entire page about your dad.” She held her breath. “They knew each other. But more than that, Jake wrote that — “

“Please.” His eyes flashed, his tone sharp. “I don’t want to hear it. There’s nothing he could’ve written that would change anything now.” His voice softened. “I’m sorry, I just ...” He let the air gather in his cheeks, and he released it in a rush. At the same time, he pushed his fingers through his hair, his frustration tangible. After half a minute, he shook his head and made a sound that was half-groan, half-cry.

She didn’t know whether to apologize or argue with him, so she stayed quiet, watching him.

“Don’t you see?” His expression begged her to understand. “It’s different for you.” He motioned to the front door. “You have Clay and your kids. You have a life.” He stood and unhooked Bo from the porch post. “I have a job to do.” He waited until Bo was up and at his side. “I’m not looking for healing.” He took a step back. “Thank you for dinner. Tell the others good-bye for me.”

She stood and dusted her hands on her jeans. “Alex?”

He was already at the end of the walk, but he turned back to her. “Yes?”

“We’re praying for you.”

The sharp intensity in his gaze barely let up. He hung his head for a moment,

and then nodded in her direction. “Thank you.”

That was it. He opened the back door of his truck, waited while Bo scrambled up, then climbed into the front and drove away. Jamie leaned against the post and watched him go. *Well, God, that didn't go very well.*

Prayer is a powerful thing, precious Daughter ... be strong, and do not give up.

The answer resonated deep within her, like a silent roar across the hills and valleys of her soul. Jamie's knees trembled, and she leaned harder into the post so she could keep her balance. Rarely did she feel the Lord's response so clearly. But the thought that echoed within her was exactly what she'd read in the Bible that morning. She'd known Alex was coming for dinner tonight, and she'd been wrestling with whether she should approach him about the journal entry or wait for another time — after his two-week leave, maybe, when the shooting was farther behind him. But her devotion time had been in Galatians — one of Jake's favorite New Testament books. In Chapter six, one verse stood out. *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.*

Of course, God would whisper those very words to her now, when she felt ill-equipped and unable to reach the hurting young man who'd just driven away. The fruit of her concern for Alex would come if she did not give up. And she wouldn't. She would get the journal entry to Alex one way or another, because that was the right thing to do. Even Clay agreed on that much.

Jamie went back in the house and returned to the dinner party. The others seemed concerned about Alex's early departure, but after a few minutes the laughter and lighthearted talk continued. When their guests were gone, and after CJ was in bed, Sierra found Jamie and Clay in the kitchen. Her face was drawn and worried. “Wrinkles looks sick.”

“She might be tired.” Clay wiped his hands on a towel. He was the parent in charge of pet issues. It had been that way from the beginning. “It was over a hundred degrees today.” He thought a minute. “Or maybe she got into another fight.”

“I don't see any cuts on her. And her eyes look funny.” She held her hand out to him. “Please, Daddy, come check her with me.”

Jamie watched the way Clay took hold of Sierra's fingers and walked with her toward the back patio. She followed, but only because it never got old, hearing Sierra call Clay “Daddy,” and knowing that he so perfectly fit the description. She stood in the doorway and watched her husband and daughter tend to the old cat, still curled up on the nearest patio chair.

Clay ran his hand along the cat's back, and when he reached the base of her tail, Wrinkles jerked away and let out a pained meow. "Hmmm ... this might be the trouble." He gently took hold of the cat and parted the fur near her tail. "Sure enough. Looks like she was mixing it up with the neighbor cat again."

Sierra's worry turned stern. "Wrinkles! What did we tell you about fighting?" She crossed her arms and frowned at the cat. "We should never let you out again!" The cat almost seemed to be listening, and Sierra lowered her face so Wrinkles had no choice but to look straight at her. "Remember when you used to play dress up, Wrinkles? You were a lady back then!"

A grin tugged at Clay's lips but he hid it by looking at Jamie. When he had more control, he cleared his throat. "How 'bout you hold her and I'll get some hydrogen peroxide?"

"Wrinkles!" Sierra looked indignantly at the cat. "Thank you, Daddy. Wrinkles appreciates that very much."

Clay was chuckling as he passed Jamie, went into the house, and came out with a spray bottle of the clear liquid. Wrinkles needed a lot of hydrogen peroxide lately. Clay returned to the place where Sierra was holding onto her cat. "Here ..." He aimed a few long sprays at the troubled area and stepped back. "You can let her go. If it doesn't look better tomorrow, we'll take her to the vet."

"Maybe she should be in time-out someplace." Sierra still sounded put out by the cat's actions. "What'cha think, Daddy?"

Jamie angled her face, touched by Clay's obvious concern. He was such a wonderful dad, so good to the kids. No one ever would've known that he wasn't Sierra's biological father. His adoption of her simply made official what anyone else could easily see. Sierra was his daughter, no doubt.

"Well," Clay bit his lip, again doing his best to stay serious. "Maybe we could give her another chance. She might've learned her lesson this time."

Eventually Sierra agreed, and they left Wrinkles to wander off to the back of the yard. Half an hour later when Sierra was in bed, Clay and Jamie headed to the kitchen. "So," he faced her. "How'd it go with Alex?"

A sigh slipped from her. "He wouldn't let me tell him what I found." She was still disappointed, but the holy encouragement she'd received earlier stayed with her. "I told him we'd pray for him."

Clay came to her and took her in his arms. "You still think this is a good idea?"

“I think God wants me to keep at him.”

Quiet surrounded them, but Jamie could almost hear what Clay was thinking, as she sensed his deep love and understanding. “Then you do that.” He kissed her, tenderly and with a confidence that told her he was doing all he could to stand by and let her make Alex her project. “I’ll pray for him. And for you.”

Peace soothed the jagged edges leftover from her conversation with Alex, and as she did the dishes and Clay cleaned up the backyard, she analyzed the few glimpses Alex had given her of the battle that raged inside him. What stuck out most were his final words. *You have a life ... I have a job to do.* And the last part, where he’d told her he wasn’t looking for healing. Jamie ran the hot water over another plate. Alex was telling the truth. He wasn’t looking for healing.

He was looking for revenge.

But that sort of angry hurt wouldn’t just consume him; it would kill him. It would drive him so hard that one day he’d make some dangerously heroic move on a call and get shot in the process. If not, he’d die on the inside, long before his heart stopped beating. Either way, spending his life seeking revenge would destroy him.

Jamie set another few glasses into the dishwasher. Somewhere in the life Alex Brady lived before the terrorist attacks, he must’ve had someone. His mother, for one. Perhaps he’d even been in love. Jamie felt the flicker of hope light the dark path ahead of her. That was it. She needed to contact his mother and find out who Alex had cut himself off from.

Maybe then she’d find the missing pieces that would better help her understand not only who Alex Brady was —

But also who he used to be.

Hoofstuk 13

Tydens ete hou Jamie die hele tyd die jong polisieman aan die ander kant van die tafel dop, en toe hy opstaan en vra dat hulle hom moet verskoon, sien sy dit as haar teken. Sy bid stilweg en vra vir God vir wysheid en die regte woorde. Toe die mense om haar vir ’n oomblik stil is, sit sy haar hand op Clay se skouer. “Ek is nou terug.”

Hy hoef nie te vra waarheen sy op pad is nie. Sy oë sê vir haar dat hy reeds weet, en dat hy huiwerig is oor haar vasberadenheid om Alex te help. Huiwerig, maar nie daarteen gekant nie. Hulle het weer ’n paar keer oor Jake se joernaal gepraat, en of die situasie met Alex haar hart teruggetrek het in die

hartseer wat sy na die terroriste-aanvalle beleef het.

Jamie was eerlik met hom, want sy was nie seker of dit regtig besig is om te gebeur nie.

“Ek weet net ek moet hom help,” het sy gisteraand vir Clay gesê. “Probeer asseblief verstaan.”

Op die ou einde het hy ingestem. As sy voel God lei haar om met Alex te praat, om vir hom te sê wat Jake in sy joernaal geskryf het, is dit reg so. Hy ondersteun haar. Maar die uitdrukking wat nou op sy gesig is, sê vir haar dat hy tog twyfel. Jamie sal later met hom praat. Sy skuif daardie versekering weg toe sy by die voordeur kom en na buite kyk. Op die ingewing van die oomblik gryp sy haar kamera. Fotografie is haar nuwe stokperdjie en sy wou nog altyd foto's van Bo neem. Sy maak seker die kamera se batterye is gelaai en dat die geheue skoon is.

Alex sit teen die huis se muur, een been opgetrek, sy oë gefokus op iets onsigbaar, asof hy nie regtig hier is nie, maar êrens ver, ver weg. Sy hond lê langs hom met sy kop op sy pote, en hulle al twee kyk na haar toe sy uitkom. Jamie laat sak haar kamera en weerstaan die begeerte om om te draai en dadelik terug te gaan tafel toe, na die veilige gesprekke oor goudvisse en kinders.

Help my, Here. Gee vir my die woorde. Sy loop na hulle toe. “Ek het ’n nuwe kamera gekry.” Sy haal haar skouers op. “Kan ek ’n paar foto's van jou en Bo neem?”

Alex lyk verras. “Hmm ... seker maar.” Hy glimlag, so asof hy verlig is dat sy nie iets diepers gaan vra nie.

Sy praat oor aandete en die kinders terwyl sy ’n klomp foto's van Alex saam met Bo neem, en van Bo alleen. “Hy is ’n pragtige hond.”

“Die beste hond ooit.” Alex vryf oor Bo se rug. “Daar is nie nog so ’n hond soos hy nie.”

Jamie se hart klop vinniger. Om foto's te neem, kan ook net so lank neem. Sy maak die voordeur oop en sit die kamera op die tafeltjie net langs die deur neer. Sy kom weer uit en steek haar hande in haar broek se agtersakke. “Gee jy om as ek ’n bietjie by julle sit?”

Alex lyk onmiddellik ongemaklik met die idee. Jamie weet hy sal nie sommer ontvanklik wees vir wat sy sê nie, maar sy moet probeer. Dit is iets wat sy voel God wil hê sy moet doen.

Bo gaap en sit weer sy kop op sy pote neer. Alex kyk na hom en kyk dan senuweeagtig na Jamie. “Hmm ... eintlik is ek weer op pad in. Ek wou net kom kyk hoe dit met Bo gaan.” Hy besef dat sy verskoning maar flou klink wanneer ’n mens dink aan hoe hy net daar gesit het. “Ek veronderstel ... ek weet nie. My aandag is afgelei.”

Jamie kry meer selfvertroue. Sy gaan sit kruisbeen op die stoep met haar lyf na Alex gedraai. “Ek is jammer ... oor die skietery.”

“Ja. Dit gebeur maar.” Alex vryf Bo oor sy kop en staar na hom. “Maar ek het nie eintlik tyd weg van die werk nodig nie.”

Sy dink aan haar jare by St. Paul's Chapel, hoe vasberade sy was om nie een dag te mis om betekenis te gee aan Jake se dood nie. 'n Motor ry verby en dit gee vir Jamie tyd om moed bymekaar te skraap. Toe die motor weg is en sy begin praat, is haar stem diep, anders as voorheen. "Ek verstaan, Alex. Meer as wat jy kan raai."

Hy kyk na haar met sy oë op skrefies getrek, net genoeg sodat sy die vraagtekens daarin kan sien, asof hy dit hardop bevraagteken.

Jamie kyk stip na hom. "Ek weet van jou pa. Hoe hy gesterf het."

Alex se uitdrukking is emosieloos. "Ek het dit verwerk. Baie mense is daardie dag dood."

"My eerste man ook. Hy was 'n brandweerman." Dit maak steeds seer om daaroor te praat. "Hy is dood in die Twin Towers."

Vir die eerste keer vandat hy deel is van hulle lewens, verkrummel die mure om Alex se hart effens. Jamie kan die verandering in sy oë sien. "Jy ... jy was getroud met 'n brandweerman?"

"Ja." Sy trek haar bene op en hou dit teen haar bors vas. "Sy naam was Jake Bryan."

"Hoekom ... " hy kyk weer voor hom. "Hoekom het Clay nooit iets gesê nie?"

"Wanda ook. Haar man was ook 'n brandweerman in New York."

Alex sit regop, sy rug styf. Sy oë is wyd oop en hy knip dit nie. "Ek sou dit nooit kon raai nie." Hy ontspan effens. "Hoekom het niemand vir my gesê nie?"

"Die mans het gedink dit sal jou afskrik." Jamie kan die hartseer in haar flou glimlag aanvoel. "Te veel pyn."

Hy is stil, dink na oor wat hy nou net gehoor het. "Nou hoekom sê jy my nou? Wat het jou hier na my toe laat kom?"

Jamie haal stadig asem, laat God toe om haar gedagtes in woorde te verander.

"Vir lank het ek gewonder of jou pa nie dalk my eerste man geken het nie."

Sy kyk verby die dakke van die huise oorkant die straat. "Ek en Wanda het al daaroor gepraat, maar daar was geen verbintenis wat haar man en Jake betref het nie. Maar ek was nie seker oor jou pa nie."

"Wat maak dit in elk geval saak?" 'n Spiertjie in Alex se wang trek saam. "Dit sal hulle nie terugbring nie."

Bo hoor seker die verandering in Alex se stemtoon, want die hond lig sy kop net lank genoeg op om sin te maak van die gesprek. Toe hy sien alles is reg, strek hy homself weer uit.

Jamie se hart klop vinniger as tevore, en sy probeer die regte woorde vind. Sy wil vir hom sê dat dit wel saak maak, want die terroriste is sewe jaar later steeds besig om oorlog te voer in Alex se hart en siel. Maar sy wil nie dat hy die aftog blaas nie. "My man het 'n joernaal gehad. Vir jare terwyl hy vir die brandweer gewerk het, het hy sy gedagtes neergeskryf. Hy het ook geskryf oor die mense wat hy ontmoet het." Jake se dood voel soos 'n mes wat in haar sy gesteek is en steeds daar sit. "Hy het 'n baie sterk geloof gehad."

Alex gee 'n kort sug en klink kwaad. Dan staan hy onrustig op. "Mevrou, ek

dink nie ek verstaan nie. Hoekom vertel jy dit vir my?"

Bo lig weer sy kop, op sy hoede en gereed, met sy oë op sy baas.

"Noem my Jamie." Haar stemtoon is steeds vriendelik. Sy laat sak weer haar bene en sit kruisbeen. "Sit asseblief. Daar is iets wat ek jou moet vertel."

Hy stap 'n paar tree in die rigting van die tuinpaadjie en dan weer terug.

"Mevrou ... Jamie ..." Hy gaan staan, die wroeging in hom duidelik sigbaar.

Hy praat met sy kake styf op mekaar. "Ek doen dit nie. Ek praat nie oor hom nie."

Ek kan u teenwoordigheid aanvoel, Here. Wees asseblief met hom. 'n Stille krag daal oor haar neer en sy kyk na hom, glad nie afgeskrik nie. "Ek sal nie lank wees nie." Sy wys na die plek waar Alex gesit het. "Asseblief."

Vir 'n paar sekondes lyk dit of Alex sy hond gaan roep en weghardloop sonder om weer met haar te praat. In plaas daarvan haal hy 'n paar keer diep asem, en sy gesigsuitdrukking wys dat hy sukkel om te besluit wat om te doen. Uiteindelik kom hy nader en gaan sit weer stadig langs Bo. Hy trek albei sy knieë op en laat rus sy voorarms daarop. "Praat maar."

Sy probeer haarself die woede en pyn voorstel wat die jong man oorkant haar se hart opvreet. Dieselfde woede en pyn wat die harte opgevreet het van ontelbare mense met wie Jamie by St. Paul's gepraat het. Sy leun vorentoe. "Nou die dag het ek deur Jake se joernaal geblaai. Dit was 'n wilde raaiskoot, maar ek moes weet of Jake jou pa geken het of nie. Of hulle ooit met mekaar gepraat het."

Alex kyk na Bo en wag.

"Ek het 'n inskrywing gekry, 'n hele bladsy oor jou pa." Sy hou haar asem op.

"Hulle het mekaar geken. Maar wat selfs meer is, Jake het geskryf dat ..."

"Asseblief." Hy knip sy oë vinnig, en sy stemtoon is skerp. "Ek wil dit nie hoor nie. Daar is niks wat hy kon skryf wat nou iets gaan verander nie." Sy stem word sagter. "Ek is jammer, dis net ..." Hy blaas sy asem vinnig uit. Terselfdertyd trek hy sy vingers deur sy hare. Sy frustrasie is aanvoelbaar. Ná 'n rukkie skud hy sy kop en maak 'n geluid wat klink soos iets tussen kreun en huil.

Sy weet nie of sy moet jammer sê of met hom moet baklei nie; daarom bly sy stil en kyk vir hom.

"Verstaan jy nie?" Sy uitdrukking smee haar hom te verstaan. "Dis anders vir jou." Hy wys na die voordeur. "Jy het vir Clay en julle kinders. Jy het 'n lewe." Hy staan op en maak vir Bo los. "Ek het 'n werk om te doen." Hy wag totdat Bo opstaan en langs hom is. "Ek wil nie genees word nie." Hy tree terug. "Baie dankie vir aandete. Sê vir die ander ek sê totsiens."

Sy staan op en vee haar hande aan haar denim af. "Alex?"

Hy is al aan die einde van die tuinpaadjie, maar dan draai hy om en kyk na haar. "Ja?"

"Ons bid vir jou."

Die harde uitdrukking in sy oë verander nie. Hy laat sak sy kop vir 'n oomblik en knik dan in haar rigting. "Dankie."

En dis dit. Hy maak die agterste deur van sy bakkie oop en wag dat Bo inspring. Dan klim hy voor in en ry weg. Jamie leun teen die paal en kyk hoe hy wegy. *Wel, Here, dít het nie so goed afgeloop nie.*

Gebed het 'n kragtige uitwerking, my kind. Wees sterk en moenie opgee nie.

Sy voel hoe die antwoord van diep binne kom, soos 'n gerammel oor die heuwels en valleie van haar siel. Jamie se knieë bewe en sy leun selfs meer teen die paal om haar balans te hou. Dit is selde dat sy so duidelik 'n antwoord van die Here af kry. Maar die gedagte wat binne-in haar eggo is presies wat sy daardie oggend in die Bybel gelees het.

Sy het geweet Alex gaan vanaand vir aandete kom, en sy het geworstel met of sy vir hom van die joernaalinskrywing moet vertel of vir 'n ander geleentheid wag – miskien tot ná sy twee weke verlof, as die skietery verder in die verlede lê. Maar gedurende haar stiltetyd het sy uit Galasiërs gelees, een van Jake se gunsteling boeke uit die Nuwe Testament. In hoofstuk 6 het veral een vers uitgestaan. “Moet dus nie moeg word om goed te doen nie, want as ons nie tou opgooi nie, sal ons op die regte tyd oes.”

Natuurlik, God gaan daardie selfde woorde vir haar fluister noudat sy nie bevoeg voel nie, asof sy nie in staat is om die jong man wat seer het en nou net hier weggery het te bereik nie. Haar besorgdheid oor Alex sal vrug afwerp. Sy moet net nie opgee nie. En sy gaan ook nie. Sy sal die joernaalinskrywing op die een of ander manier by Alex uitkry, want dit is die regte ding om te doen. Selfs Clay stem saam met haar daaroor.

Jamie gaan terug in die huis in en sluit weer by die ander aan. Hulle lyk bekommerd oor die feit dat Alex so vroeg gery het, maar ná 'n paar minute lag en gesels almal weer lekker.

Toe hulle gaste weg is, en nadat CJ gaan slaap het, kry Sierra vir Jamie en Clay in die kombuis. Sy lyk bekommerd. “Wrinkles lyk siek.”

“Sy is dalk moeg.” Clay vee sy hande aan die vadoek af. Hy is die ouer in beheer van sake wanneer dit by troeteldiere kom. Dit is nog maar altyd so. “Dit was baie warm vandag.” Hy dink 'n oomblik na. “Of miskien het sy weer baklei.”

“Ek sien nie enige stukkende plekke op haar nie. En haar oë lyk vreemd.” Sy hou haar hand uit na hom. “Asseblief, Pappa, kom kyk saam met my.”

Jamie kyk na die manier waarop Clay Sierra se hand vat en saam met haar na die agterstoep toe loop. Sy loop agter hulle aan, maar net omdat dit altyd wonderlik is om te hoor hoe Sierra vir Clay “Pappa” sê, en omdat sy weet die beskrywing pas hom so goed. Sy staan in die deuropening en kyk hoe haar man en dogter na die ou kat kyk waar sy opgekrul op die naaste stoel lê.

Clay vryf oor die kat se rug en toe hy by haar stert kom, ruk Wrinkles haar lyf weg en miaau van die pyn. “Hmm ... dis miskien die probleem.” Hy tel die kat versigtig op en kyk tussen die hare naby haar stert. “Ja, vir seker. Lyk my sy het weer skoor gesoek met die bure se kat.”

Sierra se bekommernis verander in 'n kwaai stem. “Wrinkles! Wat het ons vir jou gesê oor 'n bakleiery?” Sy vrou haar arms voor haar bors en frons vir die

kat. “Ons moet jou nooit weer buite toelaat nie!” Dit lyk of die kat luister en Sierra laat sak haar kop sodat Wrinkles geen ander keuse het as om reguit na haar te kyk nie. “Onthou jy toe ons mevrou-mevrou gespeel het? Toe was jy ’n dame!”

Clay wil glimlag, maar hy steek dit weg deur na Jamie te kyk. Toe hy sy lag onderdruk het, maak hy keel skoon. “Hoekom hou jy haar nie vas nie dan gaan haal ek ’n bietjie waterstofperoksied?”

“Wrinkles!” Sierra kyk verontwaardig na die kat. “Dankie, Pappa. Wrinkles sal dit baie waardeer.”

Clay lag lekker toe hy verby Jamie stap, ingaan huis toe en terugkom met ’n spuitbotteltjie met die deurskynende vloeistof. Wrinkles het deesdae baie waterstofperoksied nodig. Clay gaan terug na waar Sierra haar kat vashou. “Hierso ... ” Hy spuit ’n paar keer op die seerplek en staan terug. “Jy kan haar maar neersit. As dit more nie beter is nie, sal ons haar veearts toe vat.”

“Miskien moet ons haar ’n bietjie straf.” Sierra is steeds uit die veld geslaan oor die kat se manewales. “Wat dink Pappa?”

Jamie hou haar kop skeef, geraak deur die feit dat Clay duidelik besorg is. Hy is so ’n wonderlike pa, so goed met die kinders. Niemand sal ooit kan raai dat hy nie Sierra se biologiese pa is nie. Toe hy haar aangeneem het, het dit net duidelik gemaak wat enigiemand anders kon sien. Sierra is sy dogter, geen twyfel daaroor nie.

“Wel,” Clay byt op sy onderlip en probeer só ernstig bly. “Miskien kan ons vir haar nog ’n kans gee. Miskien het sy hierdie keer haar les geleer.”

Uiteindelik stem Sierra saam en hulle los vir Wrinkles om in die agterplaas rond te loop. ’n Halfuur later toe Sierra in die bed is, gaan Clay en Jamie kombuis toe. “So,” hy draai na haar toe. “Hoe het dit met Alex gegaan?”

Sy sug. “Hy het my nie toegelaat om vir hom te vertel wat ek uitgevind het nie.” Sy is steeds teleurgesteld, maar die goddelike bemoediging wat sy vroeër gekry het, bly by haar. “Ek het vir hom gesê ons sal vir hom bid.”

Clay loop na haar toe en vou sy arms om haar. “Dink jy steeds dis ’n goeie idee?”

“Ek dink God wil hê ek moet aanhou probeer.”

Die stilte omvou hulle, maar Jamie kan amper hoor wat Clay dink terwyl sy bewus word van sy opregte liefde en die feit dat hy verstaan. “Dan doen jy dit.” Hy soen haar sag en met die selfversekering wat vir haar sê dat hy alles in sy vermoë doen om haar by te staan en toe te laat dat Alex haar projek word. “Ek sal vir hom bid. En vir jou.”

Vrede omvou die onafgehandelde gesprek wat sy met Alex gehad het, en terwyl sy die skottelgoed was en Clay buite opruim, ontleed sy die tekens wat Alex haar gegee het van die stryd wat in hom woed. Wat die meeste uitstaan is sy laaste woorde: *Jy het ’n lewe ... Ek het ’n werk om te doen.* En die laaste deel, toe hy vir haar gesê het hy het wil nie genees word nie. Jamie laat loop die warm water oor nog ’n bord. Alex het die waarheid gepraat. Hy is nie op soek na genesing nie.

Hy is opsoek na wraak.

Maar daardie tipe woede sal nie net sy hele bestaan oorneem nie; dit sal hom doodmaak. Dit sal hom so dryf dat hy eendag wanneer hulle uitgeroep word die een of ander heldedaad probeer verrig en dan in die proses geskiet word. As dit nie die geval is nie, sal hy van binne doodgaan, lank voordat sy hart ophou klop. In elk geval, om sy lewe deur te bring deur wraak te neem, sal hom vernietig.

Jamie sit nog 'n paar glase in die skottelgoedwasser. Êrens in die lewe wat Alex Brady geleef het voor die terroriste-aanvalle, moes hy iemand gehad het. Sy ma, definitief. Miskien was hy selfs verlief. Jamie voel hoe die stukkie hoop die donker pad voor haar verlig. Dít is die antwoord. Sy moet sy ma bel en uitvind van wie Alex homself afgesny het.

Miskien sal sy dan die stukkies vind wat haar sal help om te verstaan wie Alex Brady is. Maar ook wie hy was.

FOURTEEN

Alex took Bo home, gave him food and water, and settled him down for the night. He needed to run, but since he didn't have time for a workout before the meeting with Owl, Alex had just one choice. Let the road take him somewhere far away. He drove his truck onto the northbound Ventura Freeway and exited at Las Virgenes Road toward Malibu. No specific destination drew him, but he had to put distance between him and the conversation with Jamie Michaels. Alex turned off his air conditioning, rolled down all four windows, and let the canyon air fill the truck.

Forget about it, he ordered himself. *She was only trying to help*. But everything about those fifteen minutes on the porch stayed front-and-center in his mind. How was it possible? Jamie and Wanda had both lost firefighter husbands in the terrorist attacks. The idea that he'd been coming to Clay's house every month for a year without knowing about their connection was more than Alex could take in. He laughed one time, a bitter, ironic laugh. What had he just told himself? If Clay hadn't come home from the hostage call that day, Jamie wouldn't have known what to do, right? Wasn't that it? He had guessed she and the kids would've been decimated by that kind of tragedy.

But no. Jamie Michaels had been through it all before. He drove with one hand, wishing he had a reason to open up his engines. The wind caught him square in the face, whipping his hair and filling his ears with the sound. But it did nothing to stop his mind from racing through this new reality. Jamie had been dealt the same tragic hand as he had, but somehow she'd found peace and healing.

Suddenly, he thought of something else. Sierra, their oldest daughter. If Jamie's first husband was killed in the terrorist attacks, then ... that meant the child had been four or five when she'd lost her daddy. The reason she didn't look like Clay was because her real father was dead.

Alex sucked in a sharp breath. The information was more than he could process. Joe and Wanda's story must've been different. Very different. He'd heard them talk about the younger days, so the fact that she'd been married to

a firefighter didn't really add up. He'd have to find out more about that later. But either way he was surrounded by 9/11 survivors.

And as if that wasn't enough, Jamie's husband had kept a journal? Notes about his days as a firefighter? FDNY guys were either loud and full of surface talk or quiet and tight-lipped — at least the ones his dad used to bring around the house. Other than his father, Alex hadn't thought there was another New York firefighter whose passion for the job came from a tender, transparent heart. But if Jamie's husband had kept a journal ... he must've been very much like Alex's dad.

Then when Jamie got to the part about finding a journal entry that mentioned his father's name, it was all a little too far out there. Like she was making the story up as she went along, or like she was trying to crawl into a place inside his heart that he had long since convinced himself no longer existed.

He clamped his jaw tight and made the sweeping right curve that put him at the beginning of Malibu Canyon. What did it matter if Jamie's husband had written about Alex's dad? Nothing in the guy's journal could've added a single detail to what Alex had known about his father, what he'd admired about him.

His dad was a hero long before he died in the collapse of the Twin Towers. He sat next to Alex at the kitchen table every weeknight from middle school on, teaching him how to find the circumference of a circle or the chemical names for salt and carbon dioxide and water. Testing him on the *Bill of Rights* and helping him edit his essay on George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. He took him to the park to throw a football and taught him how to shave two seconds off his sprint time in the hundred-yard dash. He was there every single time Alex needed him — right up until the morning of September 11.

Angry tears poked pins at his eyes, but Alex blinked them back. Crying wouldn't help. His dad was gone and he wasn't coming back. Period. Even so, the memories remained. Like with Holly, Alex didn't allow time for reminiscing, otherwise the pain would paralyze him. He didn't need heartbreak; he needed determination. Drive, not grief, was what saw him through every shift with the LA Sheriff's Department. The sort of drive that could keep him on his game sixty or eighty hours a week, so that no more creeps could steal the happy life from some other unsuspecting family.

He slowed down, taking the curves with expert care. His dad might as well be riding shotgun. That's how clear his father's image remained in Alex's mind, his tall and handsome dad, the smile in his eyes, the laughter in his voice. The man never once thought of himself, not at work and not at home. His last morning alive, he'd only been concerned that he and Alex talk about Alex's future, about him being a doctor or a lawyer or a salesman. Anything but a

firefighter.

"I'm concerned for you, Son," his dad had told him. "You're driven and competitive. Fighting fires can take over a person's life and leave him nothing for the people back home."

His dad's final concern as he left for work that Tuesday was that Alex might find a career that would allow him an amazing life. *Others*. That's what drove his father in everything he did. Of course, he'd be racing up the stairs of the Twin Towers when everyone else was running down. His dad wouldn't have had it any other way.

Alex dug his fingers into the steering wheel. He tried his best never to go back to that horrible Tuesday morning. But here, winding through the canyon toward the beach, he couldn't stop himself. He'd been sitting in his Shakespeare class, first period, watching the door for the moment when Holly would pass by like she did every day at that time. Some kid from across the hall ran in and shouted something about a plane crashing into a building in the city.

There were TVs in every room, and almost instantly the footage was being broadcast throughout the school. All around him people were talking, saying things like, "Man, that's crazy," "How could a plane do that?" or "Look at that fire ... wickedest fire ever!"

Alex tuned out every noise but one: the sound of the announcer giving updates. Let everyone else wonder about why a plane would fly into a building or how many people must've been killed. Alex was the son of a firefighter. Looking at the first footage from the city's financial district told him that across Manhattan, fire trucks were being dispatched, racing into the streets and heading south to the Twin Towers. And within a handful of minutes, those same firefighters would be trekking their way up seventy stories into an inferno in the sky.

Don't do it, Dad ... don't go, he thought. Be with him, God ... please. He's too good. Don't let him get hurt. Please, God ... The frantic pleading ran constantly in Alex's mind from the moment he saw the flames. He was still catching his breath, still wishing he could get a message to his dad when another plane appeared on the left side of the screen and flew straight into the second tower.

No, God ... not again, please ... no ... The horror of the scene brought Alex to his feet, coursing through him and urging him to run, to find his dad and help somehow. But there was nothing he could do, nowhere to go. He didn't need the TV announcer to state the obvious: Someone had flown the jets into the buildings intentionally.

On purpose.

Alex couldn't find a place in his imagination to relate to the evil that would've done such a thing, so he watched, too stricken to move, until finally Holly raced into the room and took hold of his arm. "I talked to my mom," her face was pale, her eyes wide with terror. "She and your mother, they both want us home."

The images on the television drew him, but he needed to get home. His car was at the shop that day, so Holly was his best option. He grabbed her hand and raced with her toward the school parking lot. Maybe there was something they could do. If they could make it into Manhattan, maybe they could catch his dad and get him home. Before he reached the Twin Towers. They were irrational thoughts, all of them. As they drove home, they listened to the radio, and when Holly dropped him off, tears were streaming down her face. "What's happening? It's like the world's gone crazy."

Alex didn't know what to say, but he wanted to get inside, needed to see for himself again that the Twin Towers were really on fire. That he hadn't dreamed it. Needed to hear the reports about whether firefighters were actually being sent in to fight what looked like unbeatable fires. He promised to call Holly later, and he tore from her car, racing up the sidewalk and into his house.

His mother was sitting there, stone still, watching the TV, and ...

Alex stopped himself. Stopped the memories cold right there. He couldn't take another minute of remembering. His heart was pounding so hard he could hear it, and his face felt flushed from the searing pain of the images in his head. He exhaled and tried to slow his heartbeat. The fear and agony and shock of that day was as real inside him now as it had been seven years ago.

Ahead of him, the ocean came into view, spread out beneath a hint of remaining daylight. With no plan, and no way to stop his racing heart, Alex took the easy route. At the light where Malibu Canyon ended at Pacific Coast Highway, he turned left and then right into the parking lot for Malibu Beach. A few surfers hung out near the showers, rubbing down their boards, peeling off wetsuits. They didn't notice him, another guy in a truck.

He parked in a spot that gave him a clear view of the water, and again he exhaled long and slow. The events of 9/11 were too agonizing to relive, and he could do nothing to change the outcome. So why remember it at all, except to let it motivate him? The criminals on the streets of Los Angeles County? They might as well all have been members of the al Qaeda. People who plotted evil were all the same, and someone needed to take care of them.

Someone other than God, because He didn't seem to be doing it.

Alex looked at the clock on his dashboard. It was just after eight. He didn't want to risk being late to the meeting, so he put his truck in reverse and pulled back into traffic. He missed the beach, missed surfing the way he'd done so often when he first moved here. The power of the waves beneath him was for a few seconds like wrestling his loss, like finding relief from it.

He would bring Bo here tomorrow, after his workout at Pierce College. That way he could surf and Bo could watch, and by the end of the afternoon he'd be one day closer to wearing his uniform again.

Shadows danced between the mountain peaks as Alex turned right onto Malibu Canyon. A sick part of him wanted to go back and retrace the day of the terrorist attacks, but he couldn't let himself think about that now, with the job ahead of him. Fear needed to be far from him, because this was his chance. An inside look at the insidious ways of the REA.

The meeting spot remained the same. Chumash Park. A sixteen-acre oasis of sloping hills and trees at the base of the Santa Monica Mountains. Alex pictured the park. He'd been aware of the place before, but in the last two weeks he'd cased it from every angle. Agoura High School sat to the east, and each of the other three sides was framed with cozy cul-de-sacs and two-story homes.

The beginnings of an adrenaline rush worked through his veins. He entered the Ventura Freeway, north again to Kanan Road, just a few miles away. The meeting place didn't surprise him, because it was smack in the middle of the sort of reclusive, high-end neighborhood that might house a member of the REA.

Once he'd been assigned to the taskforce on studying the REA, Alex had tried to climb into the REA mind-set by reading an interview with ecoterrorist Jeff Luers, a bespectacled guy with the look of a computer techie. Luers described himself as a militant, a radical who enjoyed civil disobedience. True to his passion, a year before the Twin Towers were attacked, the then-twenty-one-year-old Luers set fire to a number of SUV's on an Oregon car lot and was sentenced to more than twenty years in prison. The sentence brought Alex deep satisfaction, but there was something even more maddening.

After his arrest, Luers created a magazine called *Heartcheck*, in which he wrote this message to those who would come after him: "Smash it. Break it. Block it. Lock it down. I don't care why you do it or how you do it, but stop it. Get out there and stop it." Worse, in the same publication, Luers said, "It's a beautiful thing to see the financial district of a major city smashed to pieces." He went on to say that what happened on 9/11 "wasn't totally

wrong,” and that the World Trade Center was a legitimate target.

The idea that there were members of the REA who actually believed and thought the same way was enough to push Alex even in his off-hours. He focused on the center line stretched out before him. Did the members of the REA ever think about the people who put the fires *out*? Luers actually said in his interview that in order to stop consumerism and overuse of the environment, a loss of life might be necessary.

Of course, not every extreme environmental group behaved like the REA did. Some had even issued statements condemning the idea of violence as a means of achieving environmental goals. But not the REA.

Alex exited at Kanan Road, turned right, and drove a mile toward the hills. A left turn at Thousand Oaks Boulevard put him just a few blocks from Chumash Park. His heart beat out a hard and steady rhythm, and he was glad he'd left Bo at home. The dog would've sensed something big was about to happen, and since he couldn't be involved, it would only frustrate him.

Besides, Alex needed to be as inconspicuous as possible. No police dog, and no way he could let Owl or any of the others see his truck. A guy interested in joining the REA wouldn't think of driving a Dodge Ram. If anyone from the group suspected he was an infiltrator, they'd guess right away he was a cop. Everything he'd been working toward, the knowledge of the REA's headquarters, their plans for burning down custom homes, all his work would be gone in a single instant. His life could even be in danger. That's why he'd cased the area. At first he'd thought about parking in the strip mall at the corner of Kanan and T.O. Blvd. but at this hour the shops would be closed, leaving his truck way too visible.

Instead, he'd gone on Google Earth and found the perfect spot, a paved area nestled between the trees at the south end of the football stadium at Agoura High. Alex turned right on Argos Street and there it was, Chumash Park on his right, the high school on his left. The meeting spot was on the far side of the park, so even if Owl and the others were there, they would be near the picnic tables — out of view from his driving route down Argos.

Here we go, he thought. *Don't make a mistake*. He turned left into the school's back service road and wound his way up toward the stadium. The spot was perfect. A person couldn't see the truck from five feet away, let alone from across the street. He killed the engine and rehearsed his plan again. While he did, he slipped a pistol into his ankle holster and made sure his other guns were in place. Then he donned a hooded navy sweatshirt and slipped out of his work boots. He'd brought old leather sandals for the occasion — so he'd look the part a little better.

Finally, he pulled a miniature tape recorder from his glove box. The thing could pick up a conversation from twenty yards away. Alex had no doubt it would do the trick tonight. He needed proof of the meeting, so he could share it with his superiors. The information might never be admissible in court, but at least it would help Clay and Joe get the SWAT team on these guys. Before they lit a match to start their next fire.

He climbed out of the truck, shut the door, and slid his way through a few yards of brush, over a fence, and over a hill. Just like that, he was back on Argos. The street was empty as he jogged across and stayed to the right, cutting across the top of the park and then down Medea Valley Drive toward the picnic area. Alex slowed his pace, slipped his hand in his pocket, and started the recorder. At the same time, he checked his watch. Five minutes till nine.

Calm, Alex ... be calm. This is a war ... no room for hesitation. He exhaled and lifted his sweatshirt hood into place just as the first picnic table came into view. Sure enough, there were three men sitting at the table. Alex felt his heart skip a couple beats, then slam back into some kind of hyperrhythm. *Calm ... calm ...*

One of the men shifted his attention toward Alex, and the other two did the same. Alex forced himself to play the role, pretend he was truly interested in connecting with the REA. He kept his hands empty and at his sides as he approached the table.

“Danny?” The closest of the three men stood.

Alex glanced over one shoulder, then the other, and suddenly it occurred to him that he’d made a colossal mistake. So he was armed, so what? He was meeting with crazed felons in a dark park without backup of any kind, without a cell phone or a radio. What if this was an ambush? Alex refused to give the possibility further thought. It was too late for that. He motioned to the bald man. “You Owl?”

A slight breeze rustled the leaves of the trees overhead. The man shifted nervously, and behind him the backs of the others tensed. The short guy shrugged. “You need more than that.”

More than that? Panic tried to grab at Alex, but he dodged it. “Green Night.”

The man held out his hand. “Owl.” He stopped short of smiling.

“Danny.”

“Glad you could make it.”

He wasn't sure whether to sit or not, so he stayed standing. If for some reason this *was* an ambush, he'd have a better chance on his feet. With a quick glance at the others, he noted everything he could about their appearances — everything he could determine at a dark picnic table in a matter of seconds. Owl had a week's growth on his unshaven face, and he was easily the youngest of the three. Of the other two, the shorter one was completely bald, and the taller one had neatly combed short dark hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Alex had no guarantee about this meeting or how long it would last. His observations needed to happen fast.

"Why the REA?" the one with the glasses nodded at Alex. His eyes looked hard and unflinching.

Alex needed to think fast, think like an ecoterrorist. "The REA's not really a group, right? I mean, it's a mind-set." He hooked his thumbs into his front pockets and stayed confident. "The more of us who act, the greater the chance people will notice." He gave a shrug that said the things he was explaining were obvious. "Civil disobedience has been a part of societal change since the days of the Boston Tea Party."

The air around them was still tense, but he saw the two at the table relax their posture a little. "We don't have long." The bald guy focused hard on Alex. The chip on his shoulder seemed only slightly smaller than his ego. "We're looking for people to run reconnaissance for us. A few housing tracts."

Alex could hardly believe he was taping this conversation. "Owl tells me you're looking at the Oak Canyon Estates."

The two on the table looked at each other — then at Owl. They wore buttoned-down oxfords and dark slacks — like they'd just gotten off work at a bank or an insurance office.

"Danny guessed." Owl's lower lip twitched, and his voice rose a notch. "Not like I just brought it up."

The tall bespectacled man was still looking at Alex. "Owl talks too much." He leaned closer. "You talk and we kill you. Get it?"

Alex ignored that. "So it's the OCE, that's what's next?"

"The OCE is ours. You'll start small. Find the next possible targets."

"Right." The bald one piped in. "You'll report to Owl."

"What am I looking for? Homes only, or SUV's?" Alex's heart pounded harder, fueled by a combination of fear and thrill. "I could take out an SUV every night after work."

“The REA is more methodical than that.” The tall guy bristled. “You’ll do only what we tell you to do.”

His buddy nodded. “Or it isn’t the REA.”

Owl looked nervous, uneasy. Alex had the suspicion that maybe Owl wasn’t as committed as the other two, as if he was maybe in over his head here and didn’t know how to cut himself free. If he was right, Owl could be a help to him down the road. Alex was about to ask what they’d already accomplished and how long it had taken to plan those attacks, when a small sedan drove slowly by the park, along the street closest to them.

Immediately, Owl took a step back, and the other two stood. “Meeting’s done.” The guy with the glasses started walking in the opposite direction of the car.

The driver of the car was either part of the REA or someone undercover, a detective from the sheriff’s department watching them. Either way, the three said nothing as they left the picnic table and hurried through a cluster of trees. Alex took a different route, straight across the field toward the far end of the park. He wasn’t sure what happened to the slow-moving sedan, but he heard no sounds of a car. Was he crazy to be out here when he was on mandatory leave? He reached into his pocket and clicked the tape recorder shut so it wouldn’t pick up his racing heart. If the information he’d gathered tonight was ever going to be used, he would really have to work to convince people why he’d done this.

When he was sure he wasn’t being followed, he crossed the street, pushed his way through the bushes, back over the fence and climbed into his truck. The service road he’d driven in on led back to the freeway a different way, so that he could avoid crossing paths with any of them.

Alex was halfway to the freeway when he finally caught his breath. *Stupid, Alex ... so stupid.* A cop should never make himself that vulnerable. He grabbed a piece of gum from the center console and shoved it in his mouth. It was one thing to be driven to get the bad guys, to protect the citizens of the city in a way that would’ve made his father proud. But it was another to be so careless that he got himself killed. He’d have to keep his discussions with Owl to the phone. He could tape those conversations a lot easier.

It was just after ten o’clock when he pulled off the freeway and drove the last few miles home, and only then did he think once more about Jamie Michaels and the things she’d told him, the sad truth about her first husband and the bit about his journal. But more than that, something else she’d told him weighed heavily on his mind. The part about her praying for him. Not because he wanted to think about God or allow himself to believe again, but because if

there had ever been a time when he could almost sense that someone had been praying for him, it was tonight.

Hoofstuk 14

Alex vat vir Bo huis toe, gee vir hom kos en water en maak hom rustig vir die aand wat voorlê. Hy moet gaan hardloop, maar aangesien hy nie kon oefen voor sy afspraak met Uil nie, het Alex net een keuse. Die pad moet hom êrens ver hiervandaan vat. Hy ry met sy bakkie noord op die Ventura-deurpad en vat die afrit wat lei na Las Virgenes-weg op pad Malibu toe. Hy het geen spesifieke bestemming nie, maar hy moet wegkom van die gesprek wat hy met Jamie Michaels gehad het. Alex sit die bakkie se lugversorger af en draai al vier vensters af sodat die canyon se lug die bakkie vul.

Vergeet daarvan, beveel hy homself. Sy het net probeer help. Maar al waaraan hy kan dink, is daardie vyftien minute op die stoep. Hoe is dit moontlik? Jamie en Wanda het albei hul mans wat brandweermanne was in die terroriste-aanvalle verloor. Die feit dat hy al vir die afgelope jaar elke maand by Clay-hulle gaan kuier het sonder om te weet dat hulle iets gemeen het, gaan Alex se verstand te bowe. Hy lag bitter, met ironie in sy stem. Wat het hy vroeër gesê? Dat as Clay nie daardie dag van die gyselaarsdrama af huis toe gekom het nie, Jamie nie sou geweet het wat om te doen nie. Was dit nie wat hy gesê het nie? Hy het gedink haar en die kinders se harte sou gebreek gewees het ná so 'n tragedie.

Maar nee, Jamie Michaels het dit alreeds deurgemaak. Hy hou die stuurwiel met een hand vas en wens hy het 'n rede om vinniger te ry. Die wind waai in sy gesig, waai sy hare en vul sy ore met 'n gesuis. Maar dit doen niks aan sy gedagtes wat nie kan stil raak, die nuwe realiteit wat hom in die gesig staar nie. Jamie het dieselfde swaarkry as hy deurgegaan, maar op die een of ander manier het sy vrede en genesing gevind.

Skielik dink hy aan iets anders. Sierra, hulle oudste dogter. As Jamie se eerste man in die terroriste-aanvalle oorlede is, dan ... dan beteken dit die kind was vier of vyf toe sy haar pa verloor het. Die rede hoekom sy nie soos Clay lyk nie, is omdat haar regte pa dood is.

Alex asem vinnig in. Die inligting is meer as wat hy kan hanteer. Joe en Wanda se storie is seker anders. Baie anders. Hy het hulle al oor die verlede hoor praat, so die feit dat sy met 'n brandweerman getroud was, maak nie regtig sin nie. Hy sal later meer daaroor moet uitvind. Maar dit maak nie saak nie, hy word steeds omring deur mense wat 11 September oorleef het.

En asof dit nie genoeg is nie, het Jamie se man 'n joernaal gehad? Notas oor sy dae as brandweerman? Brandweermanne is óf baie spraaksaam en oppervlakkig óf stil en sê nie veel nie – dis nou dié wat sy pa gewoonlik huis toe gebring het.

Alex het nie gedink daar is nog 'n brandweerman wie se passie vir sy werk uit

'n saggeaarde, deursigtige hart gekom het nie. Maar as Jamie se man 'n joernaal gehad het ... moes hy baie soos Alex se pa gewees het.

Toe Jamie hom vertel dat sy 'n joernaalinskrywing gekry het waarin sy pa se naam verskyn, was dit alles vir hom net 'n bietjie te vergesog. Asof sy die storie opmaak soos sy aangaan, asof sy besig is om in 'n plek in sy hart in te kruip wat hy hom al lankal reeds wysgemaak het, bestaan nie meer nie.

Hy byt op sy tande en draai regs. Nou is hy aan die begin van die Malibu Canyon. Wat maak dit saak of Jamie se man oor Alex se pa geskryf het? Niks in die man se joernaal kan vir Alex meer vertel as wat hy reeds oor sy pa weet nie, waarvoor hy hom bewonder het nie.

Sy pa was 'n held nog lank voor hy met die val van die Twin Towers dood is. Hy het van Alex se laerskooldae af elke weeksdag langs hom by die kombuistafel gesit, hom geleer hoe om die omtrek van 'n sirkel te bepaal of die chemiese name vir sout en koolstofdioksied en water te leer. Hy het hom vroe gevra voor 'n toets en hom gehelp om sy opstel oor George Orwell se *Animal Farm* te redigeer. Hy het hom na die park gevat om bal te gaan speel en hom geleer hoe om twee sekondes vinniger te hardloop in die honderd meter. Hy was elke keer daar as Alex hom nodig gehad het – tot en met die oggend van 11 September.

Trane van woede brand sy oë, maar Alex knip dit weg. Om te huil, gaan nie help nie. Sy pa is weg en hy gaan nie terugkom nie. Punt. Selfs al is dit die geval, wil die herinneringe nie weggaan nie. Soos met Holly laat Alex homself nie toe om aan sy pa te dink nie, anders sal die pyn hom verlam. Hy het nie hartseer nodig nie; hy het vasberadenheid nodig. Dryfkrag, nie rou nie, is wat hom deur elke skof by die Los Angeles Polisie dra. Die tipe dryfkrag wat hom tussen sestig en tagtig uur per week laat werk, sodat geen skelm die gelukkige lewe van die een of ander gesin onverwags kan steel nie.

Hy ry stadiger, gaan versigtig om die draaie. Sy pa kan netsowel saam met hom in die bakkie wees. Dit is hoe duidelik sy beeld in Alex se gedagtes bly. Sy lang, aantreklike pa, die glimlag in sy oë, die lag in sy stem. Die man het nooit te veel van homself gedink nie; nie by die werk nie en ook nie by die huis nie. Die oggend voor sy dood was hy net bekommerd; hulle moes praat oor Alex se toekoms, oor die feit dat hy 'n dokter of 'n prokureur of 'n verkoopsman moet word. Enigiets behalwe 'n brandweerman.

“Ek is bekommerd oor jou, my seun,” het sy pa vir hom gesê. “Jy is so gedrewe en kompetend. Om vure te bestry, kan iemand se hele lewe oorneem en niks vir sy gesin oorlaat nie.”

Sy pa se laaste bekommernis net voordat hy daardie Dinsdag werk toe is, was dat Alex 'n beroep sou vind wat vir hom 'n wonderlike lewe toelaat. *Ander mense*. Dit is wat sy pa geïnspireer het in alles wat hy gedoen het. Natuurlik sou sy pa by die trap van die Twin Towers opgehardloop het terwyl al die ander mense afgekom het. Sy pa sou dit nie anders wou hê nie.

Alex hou die stuurwiel stywer vas. Hy probeer sy bes om nooit terug te gaan na daardie aaklige Dinsdagoggend nie. Maar hier waar hy deur die canyon ry

op pad strand toe, kan hy homself nie keer nie. Dit was die eerste periode by die skool en hy het na die deur gestaar, gewag vir die oomblik dat Holly daar verbyloop soos sy altyd gedoen het. 'n Kind het in die klaskamer ingehardloop en iets geskree van 'n vliegtuig wat in 'n gebou in die stad vasgevlieg het.

Daar was TV's in elke klaskamer, en byna onmiddellik is die beeldmateriaal deur die hele skool uitgesaai. Oral om hom was mense besig om te praat, om dinge te sê soos "Sjoe, dis malligheid", "Hoe kan 'n vliegtuig dit laat gebeur?" en "Kyk na daardie vuur ... dis die grootste vuur ooit!"

Alex het al die geluide behalwe een uitgesny: die stem van die verslaggewer wat die nuutste inligting deurgee. Laat die ander maar toe om te wonder hoekom 'n vliegtuig in 'n gebou sal vasvlieg of hoeveel mense dood is. Alex se pa is 'n brandweerman. Toe hy na die eerste beeldmateriaal kyk, kon hy sien dat brandweerwaens van oral oor Manhattan uitgestuur word en in 'n suidelike rigting deur die strate jaag op pad na die Twin Towers. En binne 'n paar minute sou daardie selfde brandweermanne die sewentig verdiepings binnestorm tot binne-in die vuurpoel in die lug.

Moet dit nie doen nie, Pa. Moenie gaan nie, het hy gedink. *Here, wees asseblief by hom ... asseblief. Hy is te goed. Moet hom nie laat seerkry nie. Asseblief, Here ...* Die rasende pleidooi het die hele tyd deur Alex se gedagtes geflits van die oomblik dat hy die vlamme gesien het. Hy was nog besig om sy asem terug te kry, besig om te wens hy kan vir sy pa 'n boodskap stuur, toe nog 'n vliegtuig aan die linkerkant van die skerm verskyn en reguit in die tweede toring vasvlieg.

Nee, Here ... nie weer nie, asseblief ... nee ... Die afskuwelike toneel het Alex laat opstaan, deur hom gejaag en hom aangespoor om te hardloop, om sy pa te kry en op die een of ander manier te help. Maar daar was niks wat hy kon doen nie, nêrens om heen te gaan nie. Dit was nie vir die verslaggewer nodig om die vanselfsprekende te sê nie: Iemand het die vliegtuie met opset in die geboue laat vasvlieg.

Doelbewus.

Alex kon homself nie die boosheid voorstel wat agter so iets skuil nie; daarom het hy net aanhou kyk, te geskok om te beweeg. Totdat Holly uiteindelik in die klaskamer ingehardloop het en hom aan sy arm gegryp het. "Ek het met my ma gepraat," haar gesig was bleek, haar oë wyd van ontsteltenis. "Sy en jou ma wil ons albei by die huis hê."

Die tonele op TV het hom aangegryp, maar hy moes by die huis kom. Hy het daardie dag nie met sy motor gery nie, dus was Holly sy beste opsie. Hy het haar hand gegryp en saam met haar na die skool se parkeerarea gehardloop. Miskien was daar iets wat hulle kon doen. As hulle Manhattan toe gaan, kan hulle miskien sy pa kry en hom huis toe vat, voordat hy na die Twin Towers toe gaan. Dit was irrasionele gedagtes, elke liewe een. Terwyl hulle huis toe gery het, het hulle na die radio geluister, en toe Holly hom aflaai, het trane oor haar wange gerol. "Wat is besig om te gebeur? Dis asof die hele wêreld 'n

malhuis is.”

Alex het nie geweet wat om te sê nie, maar hy wou in die huis kom, hy moes sien dat die Twin Towers regtig brand om dit te glo. Dat hy nie gedroom het nie. Hy moes die verslae hoor oor of brandweermanne werklik gestuur word om vure te bestry wat lyk of dit nooit geblus kan word nie. Hy het belowe om Holly later te bel, en toe met die tuinpaadjie na sy huis toe gehardloop.

Sy ma het daar gesit, doodstil, terwyl sy na die TV kyk, en ...

Alex keer homself. Keer die herinneringe net daar. Hy kan dit nie nog 'n minuut langer uitstaan om te onthou nie. Sy hard klop so hard hy kan dit hoor, en sy gesig voel warm van die pyn wat die beelde in sy kop veroorsaak. Hy asem uit en probeer om sy hartklop stadiger te kry. Die vrees en angs en skok van daardie dag is nou so deel van hom as wat dit sewe jaar gelede was.

Voor hom sien hy die see, uitgesprei onder die stukkie daglig wat oor is. Sonder enige plan, en sonder dat hy sy hartklop stadiger kry, vat Alex die maklike roete. By die verkeerslig waar Malibu Canyon by Pacific Coast-hoofweg eindig, draai hy links en dan regs tot in die parkeerarea by Malibu-strand. 'n Paar branderplankryers is by die storte besig om hulle branderplanke te was en hul klere uit te trek. Hulle sien hom nie raak nie. Hy is net nog iemand in 'n bakkie.

Hy parkeer só dat hy 'n duidelike uitsig oor die water het en weer asem hy uit, lank en stadig. Die gebeure van 11 September is te vreesaanjaend om te herleef, en hy kan niks daaraan doen nie. So om watter rede sal hy dit alles onthou, behalwe dat dit hom kan motiveer? Die kriminele in Los Angeles kan netsowel almal lede van Al Qaeda wees. Mense wat booshede beplan, is almal dieselfde, en iemand moet hulle agter tralies kry.

Iemand anders as God, want dit lyk nie of Hy enigiets daaraan doen nie.

Alex kyk na die horlosie op sy bakkie se paneelbord. Dit is net na agtuur. Hy wil nie laat kom vir die ontmoeting nie; daarom sit hy sy bakkie in trurat en ry weer.

Hy mis die strand, hy mis dit om branderplank te ry soos hy dikwels gedoen het net toe hy hierheen getrek het. Die krag van die branders onder hom was altyd om soos vir 'n paar oomblikke met sy verlies te stoei, soos om daarvan bevry te word.

Hy sal more vir Bo hierheen bring, nadat hy by Pierce College gaan oefen het. Dan kan hy branderplank ry en Bo kan kyk, en aan die einde van die dag sal dit een dag minder wees voordat hy weer werk toe kan gaan.

Skaduwees dans tussen die bergpieke toe Alex regs draai in Malibu Canyon. 'n Gewalgde deel van hom wil teruggaan en die dag van die terroriste-aanvalle herleef. Maar hy kan nie nou daaraan dink nie, nie nou terwyl hy op pad is na die ontmoeting toe nie. Vrees moenie nou van hom besit neem nie, want hierdie is sy kans. 'n Kykie in die verraderlike planne van die ROA.

Die ontmoetingsplek het dieselfde gebly. Chumash Park. 'n Ses hektaar oase van heuwels en bome teen die voet van die Santa Monica-berge. Alex stel hom die park voor. Hy het voorheen die plek geken, maar gedurende die

laaste twee weke het hy dit van hoek tot kant bestudeer. Agoura High School is aan die ooste kant, en aan die ander drie kante is cul-de-sac-paaie met dubbelverdiepinghuise.

Die adrenalië begin deur sy are pomp. Hy klim weer noord op die Ventura-deurpad op pad na Kananweg net 'n paar kilometer weg. Die ontmoetingsplek is vir hom geen verrassing nie, want dit is reg in die middel van die soort afgesonderde ryk woonbuurt waar een van die ROA se lede dalk bly.

Toe hy gekies is om deel te wees van die taakmag wat die ROA ondersoek, het Alex probeer om soos die ROA te dink deur 'n onderhoud met die ekoterroris Jeff Luers te lees. Hy dra 'n bril en lyk net soos 'n rekenaar-ingenieur. Luers het homself beskryf as 'n militant en 'n fundamentalis wat van burgerlike ongehoorsaamheid hou. Getrou aan sy passie het die jong man van een-en-twintig 'n jaar voor die Twin Towers aangeval is, 'n klomp motors in 'n parkeerarea aan die brand gestee en is hy twintig jaar tronkstraf opgelê. Die vonnis was vir Alex baie bevredigend, maar daar was iets wat genoeg was om 'n mens mal te maak.

Nadat hy in hegtenis geneem is, het Luers 'n tydskrif met die naam *Heartcheck* gestig. Hierin het hy die volgende boodskap aan sy volgelinge geskryf: "Slaan dit. Breek dit. Blokkeer dit. Sluit dit toe. Ek gee nie om hoekom julle dit doen of hoe julle dit doen nie, maar stop dit. Maak 'n plan en stop dit." In dieselfde publikasie het hy selfs iets ergers geskryf. Luers het gesê: "Dit is wonderlik om te sien hoe die hart van 'n groot stad se finansies tot stukkie verwoes word." Hy het voortgegaan en gesê dat wat op 11 September gebeur het "nie heeltemal verkeerd was nie" en dat die World Trade Center 'n voor die hand liggende teiken is.

Die idee dat daar ROA-lede is wat dieselfde dink en glo, is genoeg om Alex oortyd te laat werk. Hy fokus op die middellyn wat voor hom uitstrek. Het die lede van die ROA al ooit gedink aan die mense wat die vure moet blus? Luers het selfs in sy onderhoud gesê dat om die verbruik en misbruik van die omgewing te stop, lewensverlies dalk nodig is.

Natuurlik tree alle ekstreme omgewingsgroepe nie soos die ROA op nie. Party reik selfs verslae uit waarin hulle die idee van geweld om omgewingsdoelwitte te bereik veroordeel. Maar nie die ROA nie.

Alex vat die afrit wat na Kananweg lei, draai regs en ry 'n kilometer in die rigting van die berge. Toe hy links draai by Thousand Oaks Boulevard, is hy net 'n paar blokke van Chumash Park af. Sy hart klop vinnig teen 'n reëlmatige pas en hy is bly hy het vir Bo by die huis gelos. Die hond sou agtergekom het dat iets aan die gebeur is, en aangesien hy nie betrokke kan raak nie, sal dit hom net frustreer.

Alex moet in elk geval so onopvallend moontlik wees. Geen polisie-hond nie, en hy moet ook nie dat Uil of die ander sy bakkie sien nie. Iemand wat daarin belangstel om by die ROA aan te sluit, sal nie so 'n bakkie ry nie. As enigiemand van die groep snuf in die neus kry en uitvind dat hy 'n infiltrateur is, sal hulle dadelik weet hy is 'n polisieman. Alles waarvoor hy

gewerk het, die feit dat hy weet waar hulle hoofkwartier is en dat hulle van plan is om die huise af te brand, sal dan binne 'n oomblik iets van die verlede wees. Sy lewe kan selfs in gevaar wees. Dit is hoekom hy die gebied eers verken het. Eers het hy gedink om by die inkopiesentrum op die hoek van Kananweg en Thousand Oaks Boulevard te parkeer, maar die winkels sal teen hierdie tyd al gesluit wees en sy bakkie sal te sigbaar wees.

Hy het eerder Google Earth besoek en die perfekte plek gekry: 'n geplaveide area weggesteek tussen bome aan die suidekant van die voetbalstadion by Agoura High. Alex draai regs in Argosstraat. Nou sit Chumash Park aan sy regterkant, die hoërskool aan sy linkerkant. Die ontmoetingsplek is aan die verste punt van die park, so selfs al is Uil en die ander daar, sal hulle naby die piekniektafels wees en nie sien hoe hy nou met Argosstraat afry nie. *Hier gaan ons*, dink hy. *Moenie iets verkeerd doen nie*. Hy draai links in die straat wat agter die skool verbyloop en ry in die rigting van die stadion. Die plek is perfek. 'n Mens kan die bakkie nie eers twee meter daarvandaan sien nie, wat nog te sê van oorkant die pad. Hy sluit die enjin af en gaan weer deur sy plan. Terwyl hy dit doen, sit hy 'n geweer in die pistoolsak om sy enkel en maak seker die ander gewere is op hulle plek. Dan trek hy 'n donkerblou sweetpakbaadjie aan en trek sy werkskoene uit. Hy het ou leersandale vir die geleentheid gebring – sodat dit by sy uitrusting pas.

Uiteindelik haal hy 'n klein bandopnemertjie uit die paneelkassie. Dit kan 'n gesprek vanaf agtien meter opneem. Alex het geen twyfel dat dit vanaand die ding sal doen nie. Hy het 'n bewys van die ontmoeting nodig sodat hy dit met sy hoër offisiere kan deel. Die inligting sal dalk nooit in die hof toegelaat word nie, maar ten minste sal dit vir Clay en Joe help om die SWAT-span op hierdie ouens se spoor te kry. Voordat hulle 'n vuurhoutjie aansteek om die volgende brand te stig.

Hy klim uit die bakkie, maak die deur toe, en sluip deur die bosse, oor 'n heining en 'n bultjie. Vinnig-vinnig is hy terug in Argosstraat. Die straat is stil toe hy daaroor draf en aan die regterkant bly, aan die bokant van die park verbyhardloop en dan af met Medea Valley-rylaan in die rigting van die piekniektafels. Alex loop stadiger, steek sy hand in sy sak, en druk die bandopnemertjie se knoppie sodat dit begin opneem. Terselfdertyd kyk hy na sy horlosie. Dit is vyf voor nege.

Wees kalm, Alex ... wees kalm. Dit is 'n oorlog ... Dit is nie nou die tyd om te twyfel nie. Hy asem uit en trek die sweetpakbaadjie se kappie oor sy kop toe hy die eerste piekniektafeltjie sien. Daar sit drie mans by die tafel. Alex se hart klop wild, en dan voel dit of dit skielik buite beheer raak. *Kalmeer ... kalmeer ...*

Een van die mans kyk in Alex se rigting, en die ander twee volg sy blik. Alex dwing homself om die rol te vertolk, om voor te gee dat hy werklik daarin belangstel om by die ROA aan te sluit. Hy laat hang sy hande langs sy sye terwyl hy na die tafel toe loop.

“Danny?” Die man die naaste aan hom staan op.

Alex loer oor die een skouer, dan oor die ander een, en skielik besef hy hy het 'n groot fout gemaak. Hy is gewapen, maar wat daarvan? Hy het 'n ontmoeting met mal skurke in 'n donker park met geen bystand nie, sonder 'n selfoon of 'n radio. Wat as hierdie 'n lokval is? Alex weier om verder daaraan te dink. Dit is nou te laat. Hy tree nader aan die kaalkopman. "Is jy Uil?"

'n Ligte briesie waai deur die blare bo hulle. Die man lyk gespanne, en agter hom sit die ander mans regopper. Die kort man haal sy skouers op. "Jy het meer as dit nodig?"

Meer as dit? Paniek pak Alex beet, maar hy ignoreer dit. "Groen Nag."

Die man steek sy hand uit. "Uil." Maar hy glimlag nie.

"Danny."

"Bly jy is hier."

Hy is nie seker of hy moet gaan sit of nie; daarom bly hy staan. As dit vir een of ander rede wél 'n lokval is, het hy 'n beter kans om weg te kom as hy staan. Hy kyk vinnig na die ander en let op alles wat hy kan rakende hulle voorkoms – alles wat hy in 'n paar sekondes kan uitmaak in die donker by die piekniektafel. Uil se baard is so 'n week oud, en hy is sekerlik die jongste van die drie. Wat die ander twee betref, die korter een se kop is heeltemal kaal, en die langer een het netjies gekamde kort donker hare en hy dra 'n bril. Alex het geen waarborg wat die ontmoeting betref nie en weet ook nie hoe lank dit gaan duur nie. Sy waarnemings moet vinnig gebeur.

"Hoekom die ROA?" Die een met die bril knik in Alex se rigting. Sy oë lyk emosieloos en onverskrokke.

Alex moet vinnig dink, soos 'n eko-terroris. "Die ROA is nie regtig 'n groep nie, nie waar nie? Ek bedoel, dis 'n ingesteldheid." Hy haak sy duime in sy sakke en bly vol selfvertroue. "Hoe meer van ons optree, hoe groter is die kans dat mense ons ernstig sal opneem." Hy haal sy skouers op om te wys dat die dinge wat hy verduidelik vanselfsprekend is. "Burgerlike ongehoorsaamheid is sedert die dae van die Boston Tea Party deel van veranderings in die gemeenskap."

Die lug om hulle is steeds gelaai met spanning, maar hy sien hoe die twee om die tafel effens ontspan. "Ons het nie baie tyd nie." Die kaalkopman fokus net op Alex. Dit lyk of hy baie van homself dink. "Ons is op soek na mense wat vir ons kan spioeneer. 'n Paar gebiede met huise."

Alex kan byna nie glo hy is besig om die gesprek op te neem nie. "Uil sê vir my julle kyk na Oak Canyon Estates."

Die twee by die tafel kyk na mekaar, dan na Uil. Hulle het stylvolle broeke en donker skoene aan, asof hulle nou net van die werk afgekom het, van 'n bank of 'n versekeringskantoor.

"Danny het maar net geraai." Uil se lip trek aan die een kant, en sy stem word effens hoër. "Dis nie asof ek hom vertel het nie."

Die man met die bril kyk steeds na Alex. "Uil praat te veel." Hy leun vorentoe. "As jy praat, maak ons jou dood. Verstaan jy?"

Alex ignoreer dit. "So OCE is volgende?"

“Die OCE is ons s’n. Jy gaan klein begin. Die volgende moontlike teikens kry.”

“Reg,” laat die kaalkopman van hom hoor. “Jy sal aan Uil rapporteer.”

“Waarvoor moet ek op die uitkyk wees? Net huise, of motors ook?” Alex se hart klop vinniger, aangevuur deur vrees en opwinding. “Ek kan elke aand ná werk ’n motor aan die brand steek.”

“Die ROA is meer metodies as dit.” Die lang man lyk kwaad. “Jy sal net doen wat ons vir jou sê om te doen.”

Sy vriend knik. “Of jy word nie deel van die ROA nie.”

Uil lyk op sy senuwees, ongemaklik. Alex het die vermoede dat Uil nie so toegewyd soos die ander twee is nie, asof hy gedwing is om deel van die groep te wees en nie weet hoe om daaruit te kom nie. As hy reg is, kan Uil hom dalk later help. Alex is net van plan om te vra wat hul reeds bereik het en hoe lank dit gevat het om die aanvalle te beplan, toe ’n kleinerige motor stadig verby die park ry, in die straat die naaste aan hulle.

Onmiddellik tree Uil terug, en die ander twee staan op. “Die ontmoeting is nou verby.” Die man met die bril begin in die teenoorgestelde rigting van die motor loop.

Die bestuurder van die motor is of deel van die ROA of ’n geheime polisieman, dalk ’n speurder wat hulle dophou. Hoe dit ook al sy, die drie sê niks toe hulle die piekniektafel verlaat en deur ’n bos bome hardloop nie. Alex vat ’n ander pad, reguit oor die veld in die rigting van die verste punt van die park. Hy is nie seker wat geword het van die motor wat so stadig verbygery het nie, maar hy hoor dit glad nie meer nie. Is hy van sy sinne beroof om hier te wees terwyl hy met verpligte verlof is? Hy druk sy hand in sy sak en skakel die bandopnemertjie af sodat dit nie sy vinnige hartklop opneem nie. As die inligting wat hy vanaand gekry het ooit gebruik gaan word, sal hy hard daaraan moet werk om mense te oortuig hoekom hy dit gedoen het.

Toe hy seker is hy word nie agtervolg nie, loop hy oor die straat, sukkel deur die bosse, terug oor die heining en dan klim hy in sy bakkie. Die agterstraat waarmee hy hierheen gery het, lei op ’n ander manier na die deurpad sodat hy hom nie in een van hulle hoef vas te loop nie.

Alex is amper by die hoofweg toe hy uiteindelik sy asem terugkry. *Onnosel, Alex ... so onnosel.* ’n Polisieman behoort hom nooit so kwesbaar te maak nie. Hy haal ’n stukkie kougom uit die armstut in die middel van die bakkie en druk dit in sy mond. Dit is een ding om vasberade te wees om skelms te vang, om die burgers van die stad te beskerm op ’n manier wat sy pa trots sou maak. Maar dit is iets heeltemal anders om so roekeloos te wees dat hy sy dood veroorsaak. Hy moet sy gesprekke met Uil oor die telefoon voer. Hy kan daardie gesprekke baie makliker opneem.

Dit is net ná tienuur toe hy die afrit neem en die laaste paar kilometers huis toe ry. En dit is toe eers dat hy weer aan Jamie Michaels dink en dit wat sy hom vertel het, die hartseer waarheid van haar eerste man en die inligting oor sy joernaal. Maar nou is dit iets anders wat sy gesê het wat swaar op sy

gemoed druk. Die deel dat sy vir hom bid. Nie dat hy oor God wil dink of homself wil toelaat om weer te glo nie, maar omdat hy vanaand, meer as enige ander keer, byna kon aanvoel hoe iemand vir hom gebid het.

FIFTEEN

Jamie found the woman's phone number by contacting a few of her friends back in New York — Jake's former captain, Aaron Hisel, and her good friend, Sue Henning. As it turned out, Sue had spent time with Linda Brady at an FDNY wives' support group in the first few years after 9/11. Back when Jamie spent all her spare time at St. Paul's. She had dialed the number as she sat at the Lazy J Park and watched Sierra and CJ play on this early October afternoon. The conversation with Sue was long overdue, the way it was when best friends let half a year pass between hellos.

"I'm seeing someone." Sue's voice was brimming with the sort of hope and new life that hadn't been there since her husband Larry's death. "He's a police officer. We met at church." She paused. "We're talking about getting married."

Jamie listened as she sat on a bench close to where the kids were playing, enjoying the sun on her face. "Ah, Sue ... I'm so glad." She didn't need to comment on the fact that they'd both found police officers, or that God had a way of knowing which women could be married to men who put their lives on the line every time they went to work. That much was obvious. She pictured her friend, sitting near the front window of her house in Staten Island. "How are the kids?"

"Katy's eleven, same as Sierra. She still talks about her and has that BFF photo of the two of them on her dresser."

"Sierra has hers too." Jamie smiled. "What about little Larry?"

Sue's lighthearted laughter filled the phone lines. "He doesn't like the little part, anymore. He's eight now. Tallest kid in the second grade."

"We need to get back there, get everyone together." Jamie meant it. Sue and Larry had been her and Jake's best friends before 9/11. The couples spent their free time together and had everything in common. After their husbands were killed, Jamie wasn't sure she would've survived without Sue.

"How are you and Clay?"

“He’s wonderful ... so patient with me.” She took in a long breath and went into the story about Alex and his determination to keep people out of his life. “I feel like Alex is part of Jake’s legacy, somehow. Like Clay and I are supposed to reach him and tell him about God, you know? Help him find the healing he’s missing.”

They talked for another ten minutes about Sue’s new guy and Jamie’s love for Clay, and about the kids.

“I think Katy’s starting to forget.” Sue’s voice was tinged with a sorrow she’d long since made peace with. “She doesn’t talk about Larry like she used to, and when we see a picture of our family back then, she squints at it, like she can’t really place the details.”

“It’s that way with Sierra too. I noticed the changes a few years ago — the details aren’t crisp like before.”

“Still,” Sue drew in an encouraging sigh, “God is good. He’s taught us all how to live with our losses, and He’s given us new people to love.”

“Yes, He has.” Jamie liked the way that sounded. *New people to love*. Healing was definitely happening when people could find their way out of the dark clouds of grief to love again. Further proof that Alex hadn’t gone more than a few steps on the mile-long journey to healing.

The two made a plan to talk again, sooner this time, and Jamie made Sue promise to send an invitation if there was, indeed, a wedding in the works. Before they hung up, Jamie pulled a pen and piece of paper from her purse and jotted down Linda’s number. When the call was over, Jamie spent a few minutes relieving Sierra, pushing CJ in his swing while Sierra took the swing beside them.

“Higher, Mommy! So high, okay?”

“Okay, buddy.” Jamie grinned at Sierra. “He could swing for an hour and never get tired.”

“Tell me about it.” Sierra dropped her shoulders forward, as if she was already exhausted from pushing CJ for the past ten minutes. Then she straightened and her eyes began to dance. “Did I tell you the boys are chasing us at school again?” She made a face, but the sparkle in her eyes remained. She was in fifth grade, and already the talk between them turned to boys fairly often. “We four girls found a hiding place, though. On the other side of the school by the baseball field.”

“That’s good.” Jamie studied her daughter, the way her face still held a strong resemblance to Jake’s. “Boys can wait awhile.”

Sierra giggled. "That's what Daddy says."

Jamie smiled, because with Sierra's words, Sue's statement came rushing back. The part about God giving them new people to love. The fact that Sierra would have not one, but two wonderful fathers in her lifetime was more than Jamie could have asked for.

"Slide!" CJ pointed to the climbing structure and a couple of built-in slides across the sandy play area. "Out, Mommy! Peeeeese!"

She lifted him from his swing. "Can you go with him, Sierra, sweetie? I have one more phone call, okay?"

"Sure." She stood up from the swing and took hold of CJ's hand. "I like the slides too, right, Ceej?"

"Yay!" He strained forward, pulling her along behind him. "Come on, Sissy ... come on!"

Jamie made her way back to the bench, all the while watching her kids as they walked toward the nearest slide. She found the phone number on the slip of paper and punched in the numbers on her cell phone. As the phone began to ring, she uttered a last-minute prayer, asking God to help her reach Linda Brady, and that, in the process, some sort of wisdom might come of the conversation, wisdom that might help her and Clay reach Alex.

The woman answered the phone almost on the first ring. "Hello, this is Linda." She sounded upbeat and lighthearted.

Jamie leaned back against the hard park bench. "Linda, this is Jamie Michaels, formerly Jamie Bryan. I think our husbands used to work together for the FDNY."

"Who?" A short pause filled the phone lines. Then Linda sucked in a quick breath. "Oh, wait. Jamie Bryan ... Jake's wife. Sue Henning told me about you. Sue's Larry and your Jake were at the same station."

"Right." Sudden tears stung Jamie's eyes, and she dabbed at them with her wrist. When it came to losing Jake, there was an ocean of tears in her heart, and whether she liked it or not, she was never more than a few minutes from the beach. She sniffed silently and composed herself. "Did I catch you at a bad time?"

"Not at all. I'm a nurse now, and I work later today, but not for a while."

Jamie felt herself relax. "Okay, good." She wasn't quite sure where to begin. "Did Sue tell you I remarried?"

“No.” A smile filled Linda’s voice. “I haven’t been to a support group meeting for years now. I think a lot of us are remarried.”

The news surprised Jamie for some reason. “You’re remarried?”

“Three years ago.” Some of the joy in her tone fell off. “Not that life is ever normal again.”

“No.” Jamie smiled at CJ, just about to go down the slide. “It’s beautiful, but never really normal.” She slid to the edge of the bench, willing herself to get to the point. “Anyway, I live in LA now, and my husband is a sergeant with the LA Sheriff’s Department. His name is Clay Michaels. He works with your son, Alex.”

It took a moment before Linda responded. “Your husband knows Alex?”

“We both do. Alex has been coming to our house for dinner once a month for the last year.”

“I ... I had no idea.” A hint of bitterness now colored her voice. “He doesn’t tell me anything about his life in California.”

Jamie kept her eyes on Sierra and CJ, still on the play structure. She didn’t figure now was a great time to tell the woman about Alex’s role in the hostage situation, or the fatally shot suspect. “He’s still very hurt. Very closed off.”

“Yes. He hasn’t moved past the loss of his father. That’s why he’s out there fighting crime. Just him and his dog.” She hesitated. “Is he ... is he seeing anyone? He never talks about that with me.”

“Not that we can tell.” Jamie told her about Jake’s journal and how she’d found the entry about Ben. “I guess he and Jake were talking about Ben’s favorite Bible verse.”

“John 16:33.” Linda didn’t hesitate. “Did you tell Alex about the entry?”

“He wouldn’t let me.” The defeat was still there in Jamie’s voice, but it was tempered by a new sense of hope. Certainly his mother would be able to shed some light on the young man. “He told me that getting past 9/11 was different for me because I have Clay, and that made me think ... was there someone for Alex ... a special girl? Before the terrorist attacks?”

Linda sighed. “There was. Her name was Holly Brooks. She and Alex dated from their freshman year on, right up until that awful day during their senior year of high school.”

“And then?”

"I don't know. A part of Alex died that day. The part capable of trusting and loving."

The thought was so sad. Again, Jamie felt her eyes grow damp. "Do you still talk to her?"

"Actually, she moved to LA. Works for a developer, at least she used to. I have her information written down somewhere." Linda's cheerful tone was all but gone. "Alex loved that girl with his whole being. I always thought if someone could find the old Alex in the pile of debris left after the collapse of those towers, it would be Holly. She went to LA because of Alex."

The flicker of hope in Jamie burned a little brighter. "Then they've talked."

"Just once, as far as I know. Alex turned her away. Told her he could never give her the life or the love she deserved. His only purpose in life was his police work. Making his dad proud, doing his part to prevent the murder of other people's fathers."

Jamie's heart hurt listening to the details. No wonder Alex's eyes were full of so much pain. He'd lost more than his father; he'd put aside his girl and his future ... everything that had mattered for the first eighteen years of his life. "How did Holly take it?"

"I haven't talked to her in a year or so. She left me a message a few months ago that she's seeing someone, trying to move on. The whole thing's so sad."

Jamie's mind raced. "You said you had her information somewhere? Do you think you could give it to me? Maybe she could help Clay and me understand him better, the way he used to be?"

The slight chuckle that came from Linda was more hopeless than humorous. "It's too late for that, but ... well, I don't think she'd mind if you had her information. At least her work number."

This was what Jamie had prayed for, a breakthrough, some new way she could reach Alex. She silently prayed while Linda looked for the details.

"Here we go." Linda sounded doubtful. "She works for a developer named Dave Jacobs." Linda rattled off the girl's work number. "I'll say this ... if you and Clay care enough about my son to do this, then my husband and I will be praying. That's all I can do for him anymore." A crack in her voice betrayed the depth of her heartache. "Seven years ago, I lost my husband and my son, all on the same day. Since then I've prayed for a breakthrough and maybe ... maybe somehow this is it."

The phone call ended with Jamie promising to keep in touch with Linda, and

to pass along updates about how Alex was doing or if he was making any progress. When Jamie slipped her phone back into her purse, she thought about this Holly Brooks, a girl so in love with Alex she had moved across the country to follow him. Suddenly, in the warmth of the afternoon sun, Jamie was convinced of two things: First, God was indeed leading her to work on behalf of Alex's healing, as a part of Jake's legacy and her own. And second, she needed to make a call to Holly Brooks, to see if she could help them understand Alex a little better. At the same time, maybe Jamie could determine whether Holly had moved on and found love elsewhere. Because maybe, Jamie suspected, just maybe, she was still longing for the striking young deputy who had captured her heart when she was just a girl.

Hoofstuk 15

Jamie kry die vrou se telefoonnommer deur 'n paar van haar vriende in New York te bel – Jake se voormalige kaptein, Aaron Hisel, en haar goeie vriendin, Sue Henning. Sy vind uit dat Sue gedurende die paar jaar ná 11 September tyd saam met Linda Brady deurgebring het by die brandweerstasie se ondersteuningsroep vir vroue. Toe Jamie al haar vrye tyd by St. Paul's deurgebring het. Sy bel vir Sue terwyl sy in Lazy J Park sit en kyk hoe Sierra en CJ op hierdie Oktobermiddag speel. Sy en Sue moes al lankal weer met mekaar gepraat het; maar ses maande het reeds verloop sedert hierdie beste vriende vir mekaar hallo gesê het.

“Ek het 'n nuwe vriend.” Daar is hoop en nuwe lewe in Sue se stem te bespeur wat nie daar was sedert haar man, Larry, se dood nie. “Hy is 'n polisieman. Ons het by die kerk ontmoet.” Sy bly 'n rukkie stil. “Ons dink daaraan om te trou.”

Jamie luister terwyl sy op die bankie sit nie ver van waar die kinders speel nie. Sy geniet die son wat op haar gesig skyn. “Ag, Sue ... ek is so bly.” Sy hoef nie iets te sê oor die feit dat albei van hulle polisiemanne gekry het nie, of dat God weet watter vroue met mans getroud kan wees wat hulle lewens op die spel plaas elke keer wanneer hulle werk toe gaan. Dit is heel duidelik. Sy stel haar vriendin voor waar sy naby die voorste venster van haar huis in Staten Island sit. “Hoe gaan dit met die kinders?”

“Katy is elf, so oud soos Sierra. Sy praat steeds oor haar en het 'n foto van hulle twee op haar spieëlkas.”

“Sierra ook.” Jamie glimlag. “Wat van klein Larry?”

Sue se lighartige gelag klink aan die ander kant op. “Hy hou nie meer van die woord *klein* nie. Hy is nou agt. Langste kind in sy klas.”

“Ons moet weer kuier, almal bymekaarkry.” Jamie bedoel dit. Voor 11 September was Sue en Larry haar en Jake se beste vriende. Die paartjies het hulle vrye tyd saam deurgebring en alles gemeen gehad. Jamie is nie seker sy sou haar man se dood sonder Sue oorleef het nie.

“Hoe gaan dit met jou en Clay?”

“Hy is wonderlik ... so geduldig met my.” Sy asem diep in en vertel dan die storie van Alex en sy vasberadenheid om mense uit sy lewe te hou. “Ek voel asof Alex op die een of ander manier deel van Jake se nalatenskap is. Asof ek en Clay veronderstel is om na hom toe uit te reik en hom van God te vertel. Hom moet help om genesing te vind.”

Hulle praat vir nog tien minute oor die nuwe man in Sue se lewe en Jamie se liefde vir Clay, en oor die kinders.

“Ek dink Katy is besig om te vergeet.” ’n Mens hoor hartseer in Sue se stem waarmee sy lankal vrede gemaak het. “Sy praat nie meer oor Larry soos sy altyd het nie, en wanneer ons na ’n gesinsfoto van toe kyk, trek sy haar oë op skrefies, asof sy nie die besonderhede kan onthou nie.”

“Dis dieselfde met Sierra. Ek het die verandering ’n paar jaar gelede opgemerk – die besonderhede is nie meer so vars soos voorheen nie.”

Sue trek haar asem diep in, bemoedigend: “God is tog goed. Hy het ons almal geleer om met ons verlies saam te leef, en Hy het vir ons nuwe mense gegee om voor lief te wees.”

“Ja, Hy het.” Jamie hou van hoe dit klink. *Nuwe mense om voor lief te wees.* Genesing gebeur definitief wanneer ’n mens jou weg uit die donker wolke van rou kan vind om weer lief te hê. Dit is nog ’n bewys dat Alex nie verder as ’n paar tree op die pad na genesing is nie.

Die twee praat oor wanneer hulle mekaar weer gaan bel, dat dit hierdie keer gouer moet wees, en Jamie laat Sue belowe om vir haar ’n uitnodiging te stuur indien dinge so uitwerk en dit klink of die trouklokke wel gaan lui. Net voordat hulle totsiens sê, haal Jamie ’n pen en ’n stukkie papier uit haar handsak en skryf Linda se nommer neer. Toe sy klaar gepraat het, los Jamie vir Sierra ’n paar minute af en stoot vir CJ op die swaai terwyl Sierra langs hulle swaai.

“Hoër, Mamma! So hoog, oukei?”

“Goed, my seun.” Jamie glimlag vir Sierra. “Hy kan ’n uur lank swaai en nie moeg raak nie.”

“Ma kan my niks vertel nie.” Sierra laat hang haar skouers asof sy klaar uitgeput is omdat sy CJ die afgelope tien minute gestoot het. Dan sit sy regop en haar oë begin dans. “Het ek vir Mamma vertel dat die seuns ons weer by die skool jaag?” Sy trek haar gesig, maar die glinstering in haar oë bly daar. Sy is in graad 5 en die praatjies tussen hulle gaan heel dikwels oor seuns. “Maar ons is vier meisies wat ’n wegkruipplek gekry het. Aan die ander kant van die skool by die bofbalveld.”

“Dis goed so.” Jamie bestudeer haar dogter, die feit dat sy baie soos Jake lyk. “Die seuns kan maar nog ’n rukkie wag.”

Sierra giggel. “Dit is wat Pappa sê.”

Jamie glimlag, want toe Sierra dit sê, maak Sue se stelling weer ’n draai in haar gedagtes. Die deel dat God vir hulle nuwe mense gegee het om voor lief te wees. Die feit dat Sierra nie net een nie, maar twee wonderlike pa’s in haar

leef tyd gehad het, is meer as waarvoor Jamie kon vra.

“Glyplank!” CJ wys na die klimraam en ’n paar glyplanke oor die sandput.

“Uit, Mamma! Seblief!”

Sy tel hom uit die swaai uit. “Kan jy saam met hom gaan, Sierra, liefeling? Daar is nog iemand wat ek moet bel, reg so?”

“Oukei.” Sy staan op uit die swaai en vat CJ se hand. “Ek hou ook van die glyplanke, nè, CJ?”

“Jippie!” Hy beur vorentoe en trek haar saam. “Kom, Sussie ... kom!”

Jamie gaan sit weer op die bankie en kyk steeds vir die kinders terwyl hulle na die naaste glyplank toe loop. Sy kyk na die telefoonnommer op die stukkie papier en skakel die nommer op haar selfoon. Toe die foon begin lui, bid sy gou tot God en vra Hom dat sy vir Linda Brady in die hande sal kry en dat daar in die proses iets goeds uit die gesprek na vore sal kom, iets wat haar en Clay sal help om Alex te bereik.

Die vrou antwoord die foon byna onmiddellik. “Hallo, dis Linda wat praat.” Sy klink vrolik.

Jamie leun terug teen die harde parkbankie. “Linda, dit is Jamie Michaels hier, ek was eers Jamie Bryan. Ek dink ons mans het saam by die brandweer in New York gewerk.”

“Wie?” Daar is ’n kort stilte aan die ander kant. Dan trek Linda haar asem vinnig in. “Wag ’n bietjie, Jamie Bryan ... Jake se vrou. Sue Henning het my van jou vertel. Sue se Larry en jou Jake was by dieselfde stasie.”

“Dis reg.” Skielik brand die trane Jamie se oë en sy vee met haar hand daaroor. Wanneer dit by Jake se dood kom, is daar ’n see vol trane in haar hart, en of sy nou daarvan hou of nie, dit kom altyd baie maklik. Sy snuif saggies en kry haar emosies onder beheer. “Is dit ’n slegte tyd om te praat?”

“Nee, glad nie. Ek is nou ’n verpleegster, en ek werk eers later vandag.”

Jamie voel hoe sy ontspan. “Goed dan.” Sy is nie seker waar om te begin nie. “Het Sue vir jou vertel ek is weer getroud?”

“Nee.” ’n Mens kan die glimlag in Linda se stem hoor. “Ek gaan nou al jare lank nie meer na die ondersteuningssessies toe nie. Ek dink baie van ons het weer getrou.”

Jamie is om die een of ander rede verras om dit te hoor. “Het jy weer getrou?”

“Drie jaar gelede.” Die vreugde in haar stem verdof effens. “Nie dat die lewe ooit weer normaal is nie.”

“Nee.” Jamie glimlag vir CJ wat op die punt is om met die glyplank af te gly. “Die lewe is mooi, maar nooit regtig normaal nie.” Sy skuif tot op die punt van die bankie, en dwing haarself om tot die punt te kom. “In elk geval, ek bly nou in Los Angeles, en my man is ’n sersant in die polisie. Sy naam is Clay Michaels. Hy werk saam met jou seun, Alex.”

Dit neem Linda ’n rukkie voordat sy iets sê. “Jou man ken vir Alex?”

“Ons al twee ken vir Alex. Vir die afgelope jaar kom hy een maal per maand oor vir ete.”

“Ek ... ek het nie geweet nie.” Daar is ’n bietjie bitterheid in haar stem. “Hy

vertel my nooit enigiets van sy lewe in Kalifornië nie.”

Jamie kyk na Sierra en CJ waar hulle steeds op die klimraam speel. Sy dink nie dit is nou die regte tyd om vir die vrou te vertel wat Alex se rol in die gyselaarsdrama was of dat hy die verdagte geskiet het nie. “Hy het steeds baie seer. Hy is in sy eie wêreld.”

“Ja. Hy het nog nie sy pa se dood verwerk nie. Dis hoekom hy daar is en misdaad bege. Net hy en sy hond.” Sy aarsel. “Het hy ... het hy ’n meisie? Hy praat nooit met my daaroor nie.”

“Nie waarvan ons weet nie.” Jamie vertel vir haar van Jake se joernaal en hoe sy die inskrywing oor Ben gekry het. “Ek veronderstel Ben en Jake het oor sy gunsteling Bybelvers gepraat.”

“Johannes 16:33.” Linda aarsel nie. “Het jy vir Alex van die inskrywing vertel?”

“Hy het my nie ’n kans gegee nie.” Die neerlaag kan steeds in Jamie se stem gehoor word, maar daar is ook nuwe hoop. Sy ma sal sekerlik meer inligting oor die jong man se lewe hê. “Hy het vir my gesê dat dit vir my makliker was om van 11 September te vergeet, omdat ek vir Clay het, en dit het my laat dink ... Was daar iemand in Alex se lewe ... ’n spesiale meisie? Voor die terroriste-aanvalle?”

Linda sug. “Daar was. Haar naam is Holly Brooks. Sy en Alex het sedert hul hoërskooldae uitgegaan, tot daardie aaklige dag in hulle laaste jaar op skool.”

“En toe?”

“Ek weet nie. ’n Deel van Alex het daardie dag doodgegaan. Die deel wat ’n mens in staat stel om te vertrou en lief te hê.”

Dit is so hartseer om daaraan te dink. Weereens voel Jamie hoe die tranen in haar oë opwel. “Praat jy steeds met haar?”

“Om die waarheid te sê, sy het Los Angeles toe verhuis. Werk vir ’n ontwikkelaar, of sy het altyd. Ek het haar telefoonnommer êrens neergeskryf.”

Linda se opgewekte stemtoon is iets van die verlede. “Alex het daardie meisie met sy hele hart liefgehad. Ek het altyd gedink dat as iemand die ou Alex in die puinhoop van daardie torings kan kry, dit Holly is. Sy het agter Alex aan Los Angeles toe getrek.”

Die hoop in Jamie word al hoe sterker. “Dan het hulle gepraat.”

“Net een keer, sover ek weet. Alex het haar afgejak. Vir haar gesê hy kan nooit vir haar die lewe of die liefde gee wat sy verdien nie. Dat polisiewerk sy enigste doel in die lewe is. Om sy pa trots te maak, sy deel te doen om te sorg dat ander mense se pa’s nie doodgemaak word nie.”

Jamie voel hoe haar hart seer word terwyl sy na die besonderhede luister. Geen wonder Alex se oë is so vol pyn nie. Hy het meer as net sy pa verloor; hy het sy meisie en sy toekoms weggeskuif ... alles wat vir die eerste agtien jaar van sy lewe vir hom saak gemaak het. “Hoe het Holly daaroor gevoel?”

“Ek het so ’n jaar gelede met haar gepraat. Sy het ’n paar maande gelede vir my ’n boodskap gelos dat sy in ’n verhouding is en probeer aanbeweeg. Die hele situasie is só hartseer.”

Jamie se kop werk oortyd. “Jy het gesê jy het haar telefoonnommer êrens? Kan jy dit dalk vir my gee? Miskien kan sy vir my en Clay help om hom beter te verstaan, wie hy was?”

Linda lag skielik. Dit klink egter meer hopeloos as dat iets snaaks was. “Dis te laat daarvoor, maar ... wel, ek dink nie sy sal omgee as jy haar telefoonnommer het nie. Ten minste haar werknommer.”

Dit is waarvoor Jamie gebid het; ’n deurbraak, ’n nuwe manier om vir Alex te bereik. Sy bid stilweg terwyl Linda na die telefoonnommer soek.

“Hier is dit.” Linda klink of sy nie seker is nie. “Sy werk vir ’n ontwikkelaar met die naam Dave Jacobs.” Linda rammel die vrou se werknommer af. “As jy en Clay genoeg vir my seun omgee om dit te doen, sal ek en my man bid. Dis al wat ek nou nog vir hom kan doen.” Die hartseer in haar stem maak dit duidelik dat haar hart gebreek is. “Sewe jaar gelede het ek my man en my seun verloor, op dieselfde dag. Sedert daardie dag bid ek al vir ’n deurbraak en miskien ... miskien is dit dit.”

Die telefoongesprek loop tot ’n einde en Jamie belowe om Linda gereeld te bel om haar op hoogte van sake te hou; hoe dit met Alex gaan en of daar enige vooruitgang is. Toe Jamie haar selfoon in haar handsak terugsit, dink sy aan hierdie meisie, Holly Brooks, wat so lief was vir Alex dat sy na die ander kant van die land getrek het agter hom aan. Skielik, in die hitte van die middagson, is Jamie oortuig van twee dinge: Eerstens, God lei haar beslis om Alex genesing te help vind as deel van haar en Jake se nalatenskap. En tweedens, sy moet vir Holly Brooks bel om te sien of sy hulle kan help om Alex beter te verstaan. Terselfdertyd kan Jamie dalk uitvind of Holly aanbeweeg het en iemand anders liefgekyr het. Want miskien, net miskien, verlang sy steeds na die aantreklike jong polisieman wat haar hart gesteel het toe sy ’n jong meisie was.

SIXTEEN

Holly was having trouble focusing. She'd given three tours that day and closed the deal on the sale of the largest home in the current phase — the one at the end of the street. It was early afternoon, and she still had two more appointments, but not for another hour. The break gave her the chance to grab a cup of coffee and settle in at her desk for some paperwork.

But her heart wasn't interested in numbers and spreadsheets. She pushed the pile of papers back and leaned on her elbows, her eyes on the brown hills adjacent to the development. The sky was bluer up here above the valley, and today especially so. The Santa Ana winds hadn't materialized into anything too strong yet, and it had been a week since anyone had mentioned the fire danger posed by the phoned-in threat.

Life should be wonderful, but there was a heaviness in Holly's soul that made every breath a struggle. Something caught her attention, and she looked across the street and over one homesite to see Dave and Ron examining the framing of a spec home that they'd just broken ground on. Ron's confidence was like a force around him, something she could feel without seeing his face or hearing his voice. It was what had attracted her to him the first time they met.

So what was the problem? Holly released a heavy breath and covered her face with her hands. She and Ron had gone out twice now, two Saturdays in a row. The first night he'd taken her to LAX where they boarded a plane and flew to Vegas for dinner at Andre's in the Monte Carlo hotel. They sat near a grand fireplace and ate exquisite French food by candlelight. After dinner a limo met them out front and whisked them to the Hilton where they had stage seats for Barry Manilow.

Holly had never been on a date like that in her life, never even dreamed of such a thing. The whole time, Ron was attentive and proud of himself for coming up with something so creative. They caught a red-eye back, and he dropped her off at her townhouse just before three in the morning. Holly dropped her hands back to the desk and looked up at the pair of champagne glasses sitting on the top shelf of her office bookcase. They were souvenirs from the concert. Their seats were so close they had the chance to shake

Barry's hand during one of the songs.

Once she realized how extravagant a date he'd planned for her, Holly worried about his expectations. When Ron wanted something, he got it. But on the flight home he simply took her hand and looked into her eyes. "I hope you don't mind getting home so late."

"No," Holly's answer was quick. How could she mind? He'd just given her a night fit for a princess. "I'm fine ... the night was," no other word seemed to fit, "it was lovely, Ron."

"Good." He gave her hand a squeeze. His palms were dry this time. "I wanted to get you home before morning. So you wouldn't question my intentions."

With that he launched into a dissertation about faith and his moral compass and maintaining integrity in every area of life, including his relationships. Holly agreed with everything he said, but he never asked for her input, and for some reason the whole bit came across like a lecture or a speech — impersonal and more about Ron than something intimate and special the two of them might've shared.

When he drove her home, he hopped out of his BMW, walked around the front of the car, and opened her door. She'd been curious about whether he'd kiss her, but before she had time to think about it, he moved in close and pressed his lips to hers. It was quick and to the point, then he took a step back and patted her arm. "Thank you, Holly. I had a wonderful evening."

She resisted the temptation to say the word *lovely*. Instead she smiled and thanked him, and that was that. When she went inside, she walked around her empty townhouse trying to understand why she felt so let down, so alone.

Holly stood and walked to the bookcase. She took one of the champagne glasses and held it by the stem. The date should've been a dream come true, but instead it reminded her of something she'd read in a magazine once about a certain pop star's wedding. The couple had spent more than a million dollars on everything from a dress handmade in Vienna to a cake whose price tag was in the five figures. Holly read the article, and rather than longing for something similar, she caught herself feeling sorry for the couple. Could love ever find its way into a ceremony so lavishly wasteful, so grossly materialistic?

She set the glass down again. This past Saturday had been simpler. A drive to the beach and dinner at Gladstone's. But by the time he'd brought her home and efficiently kissed her goodnight, she finally figured out the problem. Both times they went out, Ron had the entire evening scripted. There seemed to be a schedule to keep, an agenda. Though in some ways he seemed the most

spontaneous guy she'd ever met, the spirit of spontaneity was completely missing on their dates. It was like he was in a hurry to check things off the list.

Dinner ... conversation ... even the kiss.

She wandered back to her desk and sat down again. Or maybe that wasn't it at all. Maybe it was all about the newspaper article, about seeing Alex after so much time. Holly couldn't stop thinking about him. She breathed in deeply and checked her watch. She still had half an hour before her next appointment. She rolled her chair a few feet to the computer and placed her hands over the keyboard. Without really meaning to, she typed his name into the Google search line. Alex Brady. Then she added the keywords she already knew would work. *LA Sheriff's Department ... award ... K9*. The story with his picture was the first thing that popped up.

And there he was, the stern-faced deputy who had once been the boy she loved. The photo showed him accepting an award, but it might as well have been a cry for help. His expression was so closed off. The phone began to ring, and in a rush Holly closed the Internet site. But before she could reach for the receiver, Ron and Dave stormed through the front door. Ron stuck his head in her office. "We need you out here." His expression was all business. "It's urgent." He continued into the house after his father.

She glanced at the Caller ID, in case the call was from one of her appointments. But the window read *Michaels* — a name she wasn't familiar with. She would have to let the machine take the call. She hurried past the computer, where the image of Alex's face remained. "Coming," she announced. She found them sitting at the dining room table, poring over a piece of paper. Whatever the problem, they both looked stricken. She hesitated as she reached them. "What's going on?"

Ron's face was several shades paler than usual. "Remember the phone threat we got the other day? The one that said we would be targeted for a fire up here?"

"Of course." Holly's heartbeat doubled. She sat slowly in the chair opposite them and looked at the paper on the table. "What about it?"

Dave handed the paper to her. "One of the framers found this tacked to the back of the house across the street."

"I didn't think the threat was serious before." Ron wasn't panicked, but he was definitely concerned.

Holly took the paper and studied it. The person had typed the brief letter, and Holly scanned it quickly, wanting to get to the point.

Developer:

Since you have chosen to violate the natural resources of our canyons and hillsides, and since you persist in creating homes that meet the gluttonous needs of the over-indulgent in our society, we are hereby giving you notice. Tear down your homes, or they will be burned to the ground. Don't think your gate can keep us out. We're everywhere.

The letter was signed only, “*The REA.*”

Holly felt sick to her stomach. There were often nights when she worked later than the others, up here alone. Day or night, she was terrified at the thought of being here when a fire might be set. “Have you called the police?”

“Of course.” Ron took the letter from her. “They’ve promised increased security, but still ...”

“They found a way to get up here and tack that threat onto one of our homes.” Dave’s forehead glistened with a faint layer of perspiration. He’d never looked this upset in all the time Holly had known him. “That could just as easily have been a match, and — “

“And there’s no telling how much we would’ve lost.” Ron stood and walked to the window at the back of the room. For a while he stared out at the hills behind the development. Then he turned back to them. “We’re surrounded by dry brush.”

“Which we’ve known about from the beginning.” Dave sounded as if he were trying to calm himself down. “Every hillside home stands in the line of fire danger. Same as homes in the Midwest stand in the line of tornado danger. People buy these houses knowing that. But an arsonist?” He stared at his son. “We never planned for this.”

Holly was grateful they’d included her in the meeting. The danger was as much hers as theirs, but neither of them was looking to her for comments or thoughts on the matter. She sat back in her chair and listened, trying not to give way to the anxiety building up inside her. “We have the gate, don’t forget. And the security fence.” Dave stood and paced to the nearest window and back. “That’s gotta be worth some sort of protection.”

Ron waved the paper at the front door. “Neither one did us any good last night, or whenever this was left here.”

Dave anchored his forearms on the table and uttered a heavy sigh. “Tell her what the sheriff’s department said.”

Ron shifted his attention, and for the first time — maybe the first time ever — he had genuine concern in his eyes. “They said we need to be very careful. Report any suspicious activity ... be aware of people wanting tours and then not following through. That sort of thing.”

“Not following through?” Holly felt overwhelmed at the idea. “I’ve given tours to hundreds of people. We’ve sold only a handful of homes.” She felt bewildered, and her nervous laugh conveyed the fact. “So everyone who comes up for a tour is a suspect?”

Ron maintained his concern. “They told me we can’t be too careful. That’s all I’m saying.”

“They’re afraid someone’ll start a fire in the middle of the day? With the gates wide open?”

“That’s why we wanted you in on this.” Dave tapped his knuckles on the table, his voice tense. “This is very serious. Every person who makes it up that road must be greeted. We must get names and addresses. Phone numbers.” He shot a questioning look at Ron. “Maybe even license plates and descriptions.”

Ron jabbed his finger in the air, and his eyebrows lifted. “I like that.” He looked at Holly. “You could do that, right? I mean, there’s not that much traffic up here.”

Holly didn’t mind, certainly, but she had her doubts. “Most of the time that would work, but ... I have to say that on the weekend there are times when I can’t get to everyone. Some people come up, drive around, and maybe get out of their cars for a few minutes. They leave before I can get to them.”

Dave and Ron seemed to think about that for a minute. “That should be okay.” Ron walked back to the table and sat down. “No one would start a fire when it’s busy, when people are all around.”

Holly tried to imagine an arsonist coming up the hill. They might avoid the crowded days, but they would hardly want to be the only visitor here, either. Catching a lone visitor would be easier than catching someone who slipped into a crowd. But before she could say so, Dave threw his hands up, his tension high. “Crowded or not, it doesn’t matter. The point is we need license plates and descriptions. Some way of tracking the people who come up. I can’t stand the thought of someone getting hurt in our development.”

They talked about the idea of a guard station and decided it might be a good idea — at least when the gate was open. That way, every car up the hill would be accounted for.

“Paying a security guard to screen every visitor would cost considerably less than the damage a fire would cause.” Dave seemed to settle down some. “I like the idea.”

The conversation wrapped up, and Dave and Ron congratulated Holly on closing another deal that morning. “There’ll be a bonus in your next paycheck,” Ron told her. “You’re really quite good at what you do, Holly.”

Holly wished his compliment made her feel warm and special inside, but it didn’t. The way he delivered his lines — even to her — made him sound like a college math professor declaring some sort of algebraic theory.

Ron and Dave left to check the progress on a home at the far right end of the street, across from the large model they’d just sold. After they were gone, Holly returned to her office. She was terrified at the thought of an arsonist. No matter how the note had gotten tacked to the back of the new house, a fire setter could do his work alone or with people all around. The idea was way too possible.

She sat back at her desk and positioned herself in front of the computer again. But what scared her more than a fire in the hills was the possibility of settling for a man she didn’t love. A nice guy with a nice faith and a nice job who knew how to take her out on the town and show her a nice time. A guy who hadn’t once dug deep enough to know her heart, and who seemed to handle dating like another to-do list. Settling for just okay, when once upon a high school romance she’d had a love that seemed to have slipped right from the pages of a storybook.

That scared her.

Holly stood and stretched. She needed fresh air, needed to clear her mind before she could focus on selling houses again. A quick look through the window told her the development was pretty quiet for now. Light work crews at either end of the street, but otherwise no one in sight. She stepped out the front door and breathed in deeply. The canyon had a sweet smell, mesquite mixed with wild grass and clear air. She sauntered down the walkway, out of the shadow of the house and into the sun. Her mind drifted to the situation with Ron. The right girl would fall over backwards trying to win the attention of a guy like Ron Jacobs.

But maybe that girl had never hiked along a deep blue lake in the Adirondacks beside a tall handsome boy who could see straight to the center of her soul. She was about to turn around and head back in the house when something caught her attention. She turned toward the movement in time to see a shiny, full-size black pickup truck spray gravel as it headed back down the hill.

She caught just a glimpse of the driver's profile before the truck disappeared behind a clump of brush, leaving only a cloud of dust to mark its place. There was something strangely familiar about the guy, but Holly wasn't sure why. She felt her stomach tighten. Maybe he'd been up here before, casing the development. She could get his license plate number. She took a few running steps toward the place where the truck had been before she stopped herself. It was too late for license plates. The guy was probably halfway down the hill. She needed to tell Ron and Dave. What if the driver was part of this whole fire threat thing? This was when a guard at the gate would've been perfect. She could've radioed him to stop the truck and ask the driver a bunch of questions.

She hurried inside, her heart racing ahead of her, and radioed Ron. After she explained what she'd seen and how the guy had seemed in a hurry to leave, Ron calmed her down.

"An ecoterrorist wouldn't drive a full-size truck Holly, my dear. Definitely not." The sound of loud hammering and men's voices made it hard to hear him. "Probably just someone curious about what's up here."

He had a point. She finished the conversation, turned off the radio, and stared out the window. What was it about the driver, the way he'd looked familiar? A few seconds passed, and suddenly it hit her. Her heart thudded in response, and her breathing became fast and shallow. She slid her chair over to the computer and moved the mouse, bringing the screen back to life. The picture was still there, the deputy and his dog, the award. The image was the same as the one in her head, but it couldn't be him. Alex would have no idea where she worked, and certainly if they were going to send a deputy up to look around for anything suspicious, they'd send one in a marked car.

The resemblance was all in her head, and what did that say about her feelings for Ron? She could tell herself she needed time, or that her mother was right — real love took work. But her mind must've had other ideas. There could be only one reason why a quick glance at a perfect stranger in a truck she'd never seen before would remind her of Alex Brady:

Her heart had never forgotten him.

Hoofstuk 16

Holly sukkel om te konsentreer. Sy het vandag al drie toere gegee en die grootste huis in die nuutste fase verkoop – die een aan die bopunt van die straat. Dit is nou vroegmiddag en sy het nog twee afsprake, maar niks vir die volgende uur nie. Die tydjie af gee vir haar die kans om gou 'n koppie koffie te drink en papierwerk by haar lessenaar uit te sorteer.

Maar haar hart stel nie belang in syfers en dokumente nie. Sy stoot die hoop

papiere weg en rus met haar elmboë op die lessenaar, haar oë op die bruin heuwels langs die ontwikkeling. Die lug is blouer hierbo die vallei, veral vandag. Die Santa Ana-winde het nog nie sterker begin waai nie, en dit is 'n week sedert enigiemand van die brandgevaar gepraat het wat die telefoondreigement ingehou het.

Die lewe behoort wonderlik te wees, maar iets druk swaar op Holly se gemoed en sy sukkel om asem te haal. Iets trek haar aandag, en sy kyk verby die dak van die huis oorkant die straat. Sy sien vir Dave en Ron waar hulle besig is om die raamwerk van 'n huis te bestudeer waaraan daar nou net begin bou is. Ron se selfvertroue is soos 'n krag om hom, iets wat sy kan aanvoel sonder om sy gesig te sien of sy stem te hoor. Dit is wat haar na hom toe aangetrek het die eerste keer wat hulle ontmoet het.

Wat is die probleem dan? Holly gee 'n diep sug en laat sak haar kop in haar hande. Sy en Ron het nou al twee keer uitgegaan, twee Saterdag atermekaar. Die eerste aand het hulle Vegas toe gevlieg vir aandete by 'n restaurant in die Monte Carlo-hotel. Hulle het naby 'n groot kaggel gesit en keurige Franse kos by kerslig geniet. Ná ete het 'n limousine hulle kom oplaai en na die Hilton geneem. Ron het vir hulle kaartjies gekoop om in die voorste ry te sit van een van Barry Manilow se konserte.

Holly was in haar hele lewe nog nooit op so 'n afspraak nie, sy het nog nooit eers van so iets gedroom nie. Ron het die hele tyd die aandag op homself gevestig, baie trots dat hy met iets so kreatiefs vorendag gekom het. Hy het haar net voor drie die volgende oggend by die huis afgelaai.

Holly laat sak weer haar hande tot op die lessenaar en kyk op na die paar sjampanjeglase wat op die boonste rak van haar boekrak in die kantoor staan. Dit is soeweniers van die konsert. Hulle sitplekke was so na aan die verhoog hulle het selfs Barry se hand geskud gedurende een van die liedjies.

Toe sy besef watter spandabelrige uitstappie hy vir haar beplan het, was sy bekommerd oor sy verwagtings. As Ron iets wil hê, kry hy dit. Maar tydens die vlug huis toe het hy eenvoudig haar hand gevat, in haar oë gekyk en gesê: “Ek hoop nie jy gee om om so laat by die huis te kom nie.”

“Nee,” het Holly vinnig geantwoord. Hoe kan sy nie daarvan hou nie? Hy het haar so pas uitgevat op 'n afspraak goed genoeg vir 'n prinses. “Dis alles reg ... die aand was,” daar was nie 'n ander woord om dit mee te beskryf nie, “dit was lieflik, Ron.”

“Ek is bly.” Hy het haar hand saggies gedruk. Hierdie keer was sy handpalms droog. “Ek wou jou voor die oggend teruggevat het huis toe. Sodat jy nie my voornemens bevraagteken nie.”

Daarna het hy begin met 'n ontleding oor geloof en sy morele kompas en die behoud van integriteit op alle gebiede van die lewe, insluitende sy verhoudings. Holly het met alles wat hy gesê het, saamgestem, maar hy het nooit vir haar mening gevra nie, en vir die een of ander rede het alles soos 'n lesing of 'n toespraak geklink – onpersoonlik en meer oor Ron as iets intiem en spesiaal wat die twee van hulle dalk kon deel.

Toe hulle by haar huis stop, het hy uit sy BMW gespring, voor om die motor geloop, en vir haar die deur oopgemaak. Sy het gewonder of hy haar gaan soen, maar voordat sy daarvoor kon dink, het hy naderbeweeg en sy lippe teen hare gedruk. Dit was vinnig en op die man af. Toe het hy teruggetree en haar arm gevryf. “Dankie, Holly. Ek het ’n wonderlike aand gehad.”

Sy het die versoeking weerstaan om die woord *lieflik* te sê. Sy het eerder geglimlag en vir hom dankie gesê, en dit was dit. Toe sy ingaan, het sy deur haar leë huis geloop en probeer verstaan hoekom sy so teleurgesteld voel, so alleen.

Holly staan op en loop na die boekrak. Sy tel een van die sjampanjeglase op en hou dit aan sy steeltjie vas. Die afspraak moes soos ’n droom gewees het wat waar geword het, maar dit het haar eerder herinner aan iets wat sy in ’n tydskrif oor ’n sekere popster se troue gelees het. Die paartjie het meer as ’n miljoen dollar op alles spandeer, van die rok wat handgemaak is in Wene tot ’n koek wat duisende dollars gekos het. Holly het die artikel gelees en die paartjie jammer gekry, eerder as om vir dieselfde te wens. Kan die liefde ooit deel wees van ’n seremonie waar geld so kwistig vermors word, wat so vreeslik materialisties is?

Sy sit weer die glas neer. Verlede Saterdag was eenvoudiger. Hulle het strand toe gery en toe by Gladstone’s geëet. Maar teen die tyd dat hy haar huis toe gevat en saaklik nag gesoen het, het sy uiteindelik die probleem ontfafel. Al twee kere wat hulle uitgegaan het, het Ron die hele aand uitgewerk gehad. Dit is asof daar volgens ’n skedule gewerk word, ’n agenda. Hoewel hy in sekere opsigte na die spontaanste man lyk wat sy nog ooit ontmoet het, is dit iets wat totaal ontbreek wanneer hulle uitgaan. Dit is asof hy haastig is om net nog iets op sy lysie dood te trek.

Die ete ... hulle gesprekke ... selfs die soen.

Sy loop terug na haar lessenaar en gaan sit. Of miskien is dit glad nie dit nie. Miskien is dit oor die koerantartikel, oor die feit dat sy Alex ná so ’n lang ruk weer gesien het. Holly dink die hele tyd aan hom. Sy asem diep in en kyk na haar horlosie. Daar is nog ’n halfuur oor voor haar volgende afspraak. Sy rol met die stoel na die rekenaar en sit haar hande op die sleutelbord. Sonder dat sy regtig wil, tik sy sy naam in die Google-soekvenster. Alex Brady. Dan tik sy die sleutelwoorde in wat sy reeds weet sal werk. *Los Angeles Polisie ... toekenning ... honde-eenheid*. Die storie met sy foto is die eerste ding wat op die skerm verskyn.

En daar is hy, die ernstige polisieman, die man vir wie sy eens op ’n tyd lief was. Op die foto ontvang hy die toekenning, maar dit kan netsowel wees dat hy om hulp uitroep. Sy gesigsuitdrukking is emosieloos. Die telefoon lui skielik, maar voordat sy kan antwoord, storm Ron en Dave by die voordeur in. Ron se kop verskyn in die deuropening. “Ons moet met jou praat.” Sy uitdrukking sê dat dit ernstig is. “Dis dringend.” Hy loop agter sy pa aan na die eetkamer.

Sy kyk na die naam wat op die telefoon verskyn, vir in geval dit iemand is

met wie sy 'n afspraak het. Maar dis die van “Michaels” – nie iemand wat sy ken nie. Die antwoordmasjien moet maar die oproep beantwoord. Sy loop vinnig verby die rekenaar waar Alex se gesig steeds te sien is. “Ek kom,” roep sy. Hulle sit om die eetkamertafel en kyk na 'n stuk papier. Wat ook al die probleem is, hulle al twee lyk uit die veld geslaan. Sy aarsel eers. “Wat is aan die gang?”

Ron se gesig is doodsbleek. “Onthou jy die dreigement wat ons nou die dag oor die telefoon gekry het? Die een wat gesê het hulle gaan hierbo 'n brand stig?”

“Natuurlik.” Holly se hart klop vinniger. Sy gaan sit stadig in die stoel oorkant hulle en kyk na die papier op die tafel. “Wat daarvan?”

Dave gee die papier vir haar. “Een van die bouers het hierdie brief gekry, vasgespyker aan die huis oorkant die straat.”

“Ek het nie voorheen gedink die dreigement is ernstig nie.” Ron is nie angsbevange nie, maar hy is vir seker bekommerd.

Holly vat die papier en kyk daarna. Dit is 'n kort getikte briefie, en Holly lees vinnig daardeur om te sien waaroor dit gaan.

Beste Ontwikkelaar

Aangesien jy besluit het om die natuurlike hulpbronne van ons canyons en heuwels te skend, en aangesien jy aanhou huise bou wat die gierigheid bevredig van die samelewing wat in weelde wil leef, gee ons jou hiermee kennis. Sloop jou huise of dit sal verbrand word sodat niks daarvan oorbly nie. Moenie dink jou hek kan ons keer nie. Ons is oral.

Die brief is deur die ROA onderteken.

Holly voel sommer naar. Daar is dikwels aande wanneer sy later as die ander werk, alleen hierbo. Dag of nag, sy is angsbevange om te dink sy kan dalk hier wees wanneer 'n brand uitbreek. “Het julle die polisie gebel?”

“Natuurlik.” Ron vat die brief by haar. “Hulle het belowe om die sekuriteit op te skerp, maar nogtans ...”

“Hulle het 'n manier gekry om hier na bo te kom en daardie dreigement teen een van ons huise vas te spyker.” Dave se voorkop blink met 'n lagie sweet. Vandat Holly hom ken, het hy nog nooit so ontsteld gelyk nie. “Dit kon netsoewel 'n vuurhoutjie gewees het, en ...”

“En dan het ons ongelooflik baie verloor.” Ron staan op en loop na die venster aan die ander kant van die vertrek. Vir 'n oomblik staar hy na die heuwels agter die ontwikkeling. Dan draai hy weer om en kyk na hulle. “Ons word omring deur droë veld.”

“Ons het dit van die begin af geweet.” Dit klink of Dave probeer om homself te kalmeer. “Elke huis teen die heuwel staan die gevaar om afgebrand te word. Net soos huise in die Midde-Weste deur 'n tornado getref kan word. Mense koop die huise al is hulle bewus daarvan. Maar 'n brandstigter?” Hy staar na sy seun. “Ons het nooit so iets verwag nie.”

Holly is dankbaar dat hulle haar by die vergadering betrek het. Sy is in net

soveel gevaar as hulle, maar nie een van hulle kyk na haar vir opmerkings of om te hoor wat sy hiervan dink nie. Sy sit terug in haar stoel en luister, probeer om nie toe te gee aan die vrees wat in haar opbou nie. “Onthou, ons het die hek. En die sekuriteitsheining.” Dave staan op, loop na die naaste venster en terug. “Dit moet ons op die een of ander manier beskerm.”

Ron waai die brief in die rigting van die voordeur. “Dit het gisteraand niks beteken nie, of wanneer dit ook al hier gelos is.”

Dave rus met sy arms op die tafel en sug diep. “Sê vir haar wat die polisie gesê het.”

Ron se aandag is nou op iets anders gefokus en vir die eerste keer, miskien die eerste keer ooit, is daar werklik bekommernis in sy oë. “Hulle het gesê ons moet baie versigtig wees. Enige verdagte aktiwiteite aanmeld ... bewus wees van mense wat deur die ontwikkeling begelei wil word en dan nie weer van hulle laat hoor nie. Daar tipes ding.”

“Nie weer van hulle laat hoor nie?” Holly voel oorweldig toe sy hieraan dink. “Ek het al honderde mense rondgewys. En ons het nog net ’n handjievol huise verkoop.” Sy voel oorstuur en haar senuweeagtige laggie beklemtoon dit. “Almal wat dus hierheen kom vir ’n toer is ’n verdagte?”

Ron bedwing sy bekommernis. “Hulle het vir my gesê ons kan nie te versigtig wees nie. Dis al wat ek sê.”

“Is hulle bang iemand begin ’n vuur in die middel van die dag? Met die hekke wawyd oop?”

“Dit is hoekom ons wil hê jy moet ook weet.” Dave klop met sy kneukels op die tafel, sy stem klink gespanne. “Dit is baie ernstig. Elke persoon wat hier inkom, moet ontvang word. Ons moet name en adresse kry. Telefoonnommers.” Hy kyk vraend na Ron. “Miskien selfs nommerplate en beskrywings.”

Ron steek sy vinger in die lug en sy wenkbroue lig. “Ek hou daarvan.” Hy kyk na Holly. “Jy sal dit vir ons kan doen, nie waar nie? Ek bedoel, hier is nie soveel motors hierbo nie.”

Holly gee vir seker nie om nie, maar sy wonder tog of dit gaan werk. “Dit kan die meeste van die tyd werk, maar ... ek moet sê dat daar oor naweke tye is wanneer ek nie by almal kan uitkom nie. Party mense kom boontoe, ry hier rond, en klim vir ’n paar minute uit hul motors. Hulle ry weer voor ek by hulle kan kom.”

Dit lyk of Dave en Ron vir ’n oomblik daaroor dink. “Dit behoort nie ’n probleem te wees nie.” Ron loop terug na die tafel en gaan sit. “Niemand sal ’n brand stig wanneer dit besig is en hier mense is nie.”

Holly probeer ’n brandstigter voorstel wat met die heuwel opkom. Hulle sal miskien die besige dae vermy, maar hulle sal ook nie die enigste mense hier wil wees nie. Om ’n besoeker te vang wat alleen hier is, is makliker as om iemand te vang wat in ’n groep verdwyn. Maar voordat sy dit kan sê, gooi Dave sy hande in die lug, baie gespanne. “Of dit nou besig is of nie, dit maak nie saak nie. Die punt is ons het nommerplate en beskrywings nodig. ’n

Manier om mense wat hierheen kom op te spoor. Ek kan my nie voorstel dat iemand hier by ons ontwikkeling seerkry nie.”

Hulle praat daaroor om ’n waghuis op te rig en besluit dit is ’n goeie idee – ten minste terwyl die hek oop is. Op daardie manier kan daar verslag gedoen word oor elke motor wat teen die heuwel opry.

“Om ’n sekuriteitswag te betaal om elke besoeker na te gaan, sal heelwat goedkoper wees as die skade wat ’n vuur kan aanrig.” Dit lyk of Dave effens gekalmeer het. “Ek hou van die idee.”

Die gesprek loop tot ’n einde en Dave en Ron wens Holly geluk met nog ’n huis wat sy die oggend verkoop het. “Jy sal ’n bonus ontvang met jou volgende salaris,” sê Ron. “Jy is regtig nogal goed in wat jy doen, Holly.”

Holly wens dat sy kompliment haar warm en spesiaal laat voel, maar dit doen nie. Die manier hoe hy praat, selfs met haar, laat hom klink soos ’n wiskundeprofessor wat die een of ander algebraïese teorie verduidelik.

Ron en Dave loop om te kyk hoe hulle met ’n huis vorder wat regs aan die verste punt van die straat gebou word, oorkant die groot huis wat nou net verkoop is. Toe hulle weg is, gaan Holly terug na haar kantoor. Sy is angsbevange om aan ’n brandstigter te dink. Maak nie saak hoe die brief aan die agterkant van die nuwe huis vasgespyker is nie, ’n brandstigter kan sy werk alleen doen of tussen baie mense. Dit is heeltemal te maklik.

Sy gaan sit agter haar lessenaar en skuif weer reg voor haar rekenaar. Wat haar egter nog banger maak as ’n vuur in die heuwels, is om vir ’n man te val vir wie sy nie lief is nie. ’n Oulike man met ’n goeie geloof en ’n wonderlike werk wat weet hoe om haar uit te neem op ’n afspraak en dit vir haar lekker te maak. ’n Man wat nog nie een keer die moeite gedoen het om haar te leer ken nie, en wat lyk of hy sy afsprake soos enigiets anders op sy doen-lysie afmerk. Sy is bang om tevrede te wees met iets wat net gemiddeld is terwyl sy eens op ’n tyd op hoërskool liefde geken het soos dié waarvan ’n mens in storieboeke lees.

Dit maak haar bang.

Holly staan op en rek haarself uit. Sy het vars lug nodig. Sy moet haar kop skoon kry voordat sy weer daarop kan fokus om huise te verkoop. Sy kyk vinnig by die venster uit en sien dit is vir eers stil buite. Aan albei kante van die straat is mense besig om te werk, maar andersins is daar niemand te sien nie. Sy stap by die voordeur uit en haal diep asem. Die canyon het ’n soet geur, die reuk van gras gemeng met skoon lug. Sy stap al langs die tuinpaadjie, uit die huis se skaduwee tot in die son. Sy dink aan die situasie met Ron. Die regte meisie sal alles probeer om ’n ou soos Ron Jacobs se aandag te trek.

Maar miskien het daardie meisie nog nie langs ’n donkerblou meer in die Adirondacks langs ’n lang aantreklik jong man gestap nie, een wat tot in haar siel kon sien. Sy wil net omdraai om terug te loop na die huis toe iets haar aandag trek. Sy draai na die beweging, net betyds om ’n groot, blink bakkie te sien wat gruis in alle rigtings laat spat toe dit met die bult afry.

Die bakkie verdwyn agter 'n klomp bosse, en daar is 'n stofwolk in sy plek net voordat sy goed na die bestuurder se profiel kan kyk. Die man lyk vir haar bekend, maar Holly kan hom nie plaas nie. Sy voel hoe haar maag draai. Miskien was hy al voorheen hier om na die ontwikkeling te kyk. Sy kan sy nommerplaat kry. Sy draf na die plek waar die bakkie gestaan het, maar gaan staan dan. Sy is te laat om die nommerplaat te kry. Die man is seker al halfpad met die heuwel af. Sy moet vir Ron en Dave hiervan sê. Wat as die bestuurder iets te doen het met die dreigement oor brandstigting? Dit is in so 'n geval dat 'n wag by die hek sy doel sou dien. Sy kon hom dan gekontak het en gesê het om die bakkie te stop en die bestuurder 'n paar vrae te vra.

Sy hardloop in die huis in, haar hart klop vinnig, en roep vir Ron oor die radio. Nadat sy vir hom verduidelik het wat sy gesien het en dat dit gelyk het of die man vinnig daar wou wegkom, kalmder Ron haar.

“'n Eko-terroris sal nie met 'n groot bakkie ry nie, Holly. Beslis nie.” Die geraas as gevolg van 'n gekap en manstemme in die agtergrond, maak dit vir haar moeilik om hom te hoor. “Dis heel waarskynlik iemand wat nuuskierig is oor wat hier aan die gang is.”

Hy het 'n punt beet. Sy groet hom, draai die radio af en staar by die venster uit. Wat was dit omtrent die bestuurder wat so bekend gelyk het? 'n Paar sekondes gaan verby en dan tref dit haar skielik. Haar hart klop wild en haar asemhaling is vlak en vinnig. Sy skuif met haar stoel in die rigting van die rekenaar en beweeg die muis, en die skerm gaan aan. Die foto is steeds daar: die polisieman en sy hond, die toekenning. Die beeld is dieselfde as die een in haar kop, maar dit kan nie hy wees nie. Alex het nie enige idee waar sy werk nie, en as hulle 'n polisieman hierheen sou stuur om op die uitkyk te wees vir iets verdag, sal hulle een in 'n polisiemotor stuur.

Die ooreenkoms is net in haar kop, en wat sê dit oor haar gevoelens vir Ron? Sy kan vir haarself sê sy het tyd nodig, of dat haar ma reg is – 'n mens moet aan ware liefde werk. Maar haar kop staan in 'n ander rigting. Daar kan net een rede wees hoekom 'n vinnige blik op 'n vreemdeling in 'n bakkie wat sy nog nooit vantevore gesien het nie, haar aan Alex Brady herinner: Haar hart het nog nie van hom vergeet nie.

SEVENTEEN

Alex had to will himself to slow down, because if the rush of urgency in his veins had its way, he'd be flying a hundred miles an hour. He'd done what he set out to do today. He'd gone to the Oak Canyon Estates to check out for himself the danger and layout of the property.

What he'd found had shot terror straight through him.

He and Bo weren't there long, just enough time to drive to the end of the street and back down again. But that's all it took to tell him what a fire would do this high up in the hills. It wouldn't work its way down the street — it would explode through it. The wood-framed homes and construction materials would go up like so many fireworks, and the hillside would be instantly on fire. Alex didn't need fire training to understand that such an inferno would roar down the steep, sloping brush and become a firestorm in minutes.

"It'd be a fire like nothing LA's ever seen." He spoke the words out loud, and from the back Bo whined. "It's okay, Bo ... we won't let it happen. We'll get the bad guys."

At that, Bo released a single sharp bark — the way he was trained to do on command whenever Alex mentioned bad guys. It was one more thing that set Bo apart. He shared Alex's passion for getting the job done. At the base of the hill, Alex made two quick rights into a housing tract literally carved into the mountain. The homes sat on lots barely larger than the footprints of the houses, with maybe ten feet between them. At this afternoon hour, the neighborhood had kids everywhere — riding bikes along the narrow street, playing basketball in the driveway of a house that backed up to the hillside, and walking with their parents along the neatly manicured sidewalks.

Alex took the road through the development, driving slowly enough that he could see a handful of cul-de-sacs that branched off on either side of the street. He was stunned at the danger the place posed. There were tons of homes bunched together on maybe six or seven acres, and there were only two ways out. Two exits for the entire neighborhood.

He pulled out of the development and realized his hands were shaking. Sure

the homes had tile roofs, but roofing wouldn't stop a tidal wave of fire barreling down the hillside. Add winds to the formula, and a neighborhood like the one at the base of the mountain could be swallowed whole — taking dozens of lives with it. Hundreds, even. He rolled down all four windows so he could breathe. From the backseat, he heard Bo walk to the window and stick his face out — the way he loved to do.

The faces of Owl and the other two came to mind, and he felt the anger again, felt it driving him to do something. Anything but sit back and let Oak Canyon Estates become victim to the REA. At the next stoplight, he grabbed his iPhone, swiped his finger across the lock bar, and dialed Clay Michaels.

Clay picked up just before the call went to his voice mail. "What's up, Brady?" His voice was raised above the noise of what sounded like a restaurant.

"Something big's about to happen, Sarge. I had to call."

"Hold on." There was a pause, and the background noise dimmed some. "There. I can hear now. Say it again?"

"We're on the verge of something big ... I had to call. Somebody's gotta be on this."

Clay uttered a muffled groan. "A wave, you mean? A big wave? Tell me you mean a wave, Brady, 'cause you're supposed to be on a beach, remember?"

"Sarge, I'm serious." Alex expected this, the reminder that he had a week left before he was even supposed to be thinking about police work. But he had to get the information to the department one way or another. He was using his Bluetooth, so he had both hands on the wheel as he talked. "I met with the leaders of the REA."

"What?" Clay raised his voice, and then quickly brought it back down again. "What do you mean? Like you put on a green T-shirt and pretended to hate trucks?"

"For a few minutes, yes." Alex wasn't worried about getting in trouble. He hadn't represented himself as a deputy, and he hadn't done anything illegal. "Remember I told you about Owl, how I was talking to him?"

"Brady, you're crazy. Deputies don't infiltrate into terrorist gangs on their off-hours. Nobody does that, and if they do they —"

"Wait! This is important." Alex had never taken a sharp tone with Clay, but in this moment he came close. His breathing came faster than before. "They didn't know I was a deputy. We met at a park off Kanan Road. I taped the

whole thing. Had a recorder in my pocket and got it all.”

“You *what*?” This time Clay shouted the question. “What if they’d found it on you? They could’ve killed you, Brady.” He was seething. “Besides, that won’t be admissible, you know that.”

“I’m aware of that.” Respect returned to Alex’s voice. “I’m not trying to build a case; I’m trying to stop a tragedy before it happens.”

Clay was quiet at that, as if maybe, finally, Alex’s words hit their mark. “Okay ... what’d you learn?”

“A lot. They’re gonna hit the Oak Canyon Estates.” Alex worked to regain control of his emotions. He was halfway down Las Virgenes Road now — headed for Malibu. He had his surfboard in the back, because he really did plan to hit the waves tonight. The trip to the Oak Canyon Estates had been on the way, and he just couldn’t resist checking out the development.

“They said that?”

“In so many words.” Alex reached back and patted Bo, but he kept his eyes on the curves of the canyon. “Check it out. Please. See if anyone from the development has called the department. My guess is the REA is making threats. That’s sort of their calling card.”

“So you’re sure.”

“Absolutely. I just drove up to the development. Sarge, it’s terrible. The houses sit right in a clearing surrounded by sky-high brush. And at the base of the hill are a hundred homes. I mean, if the winds are right, we could lose the whole neighborhood and half the people living there.”

This time Clay was quiet for several seconds. “You know what I thought when I saw your name on Caller ID?” He sounded suddenly tired. “I thought, ‘Well look at that. Alex Brady is taking time out of a stroll with his mother through Central Park to call me on my birthday.’ “

Alex remembered the restaurant sounds. “It’s your birthday?”

“It is.”

“Oh.” Alex put both hands on the steering wheel again. Traffic was light in the canyon, but he liked full control for the last curves. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.” He sighed. “We’ve gone over this before. Fire danger is high all around LA this season, and everything you’re hearing could be nothing more than false tips.”

“It doesn’t feel that way.”

“Okay. So ... you want me to check for complaints from the developer, and then what? Tell Lost Hills to send out a patrol every hour to keep an eye on the place?”

“Something like that.” Alex didn’t smile. There was nothing lighthearted about the situation.

“I’ll tell you what, Brady. I’ll check into it if you work on one thing.” The background noise was getting loud once more.

“What’s that?”

“Your suntan.” He had to talk above the sounds around him. “No more detective work on your off time, Brady. You could get yourself killed. You get that?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay, then. I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

When he’d clicked his phone off, Alex’s overwhelming alarm eased some. Clay was good for his word. If he said he’d check into the situation, he would. And if he found that calls had been made from the developer expressing concern about arson, combined with Alex’s tip, then they could justify sending a deputy up every hour. Whatever it took to protect the homes and the hills and the residents.

And the firefighters who would be forced to deal with the conflagration when it happened.

He reached Pacific Coast Highway and turned right this time. Malibu was too crowded this time of the day, so he headed north to Zuma Beach and parked facing the farthest part of the beach from the entrance. He surveyed the empty stretch of sand and the waves rolling in. It was just after three o’clock, the perfect time to surf. He helped Bo out and attached a chain to his collar. Bo was completely reliable without a chain, but if anyone walked by, a German shepherd of his stature could be very intimidating. The chain helped.

Alex peeled off his T-shirt and grabbed his surfboard. It was in the high nineties, even at the beach, so he grabbed a gallon jug of water and a bag with Bo’s bowl and a towel. Clay didn’t have to worry. He was already tan from spending the last two afternoons here. The beach was helping pass the time, but he was going to go crazy waiting another week before he could get into his uniform.

Bo loved the water, just not over his head. So after Alex set his things down close to the shore, he walked his dog to the ocean's edge and unhooked him. Bo frolicked along the foamy surf a few yards, and then padded back to Alex. His eyes were raised as if to say, "Come play with me."

Laughter flexed the muscles along Alex's bare stomach. "You wanna play, is that it, boy?"

Bo barked once. The way he held his mouth made it look like he was almost smiling.

There were no people in sight, so Alex balled up the chain and tossed it onto the damp sand. Then he took off after Bo, toward the shallow water. Every few steps he splashed the dog, and Bo would turn around and chase him. The game ended when Alex spotted a bikini-clad girl coming their way. He lowered himself and held his arms out to his dog. "C'mere, Bo."

Immediately, he wagged his tail and walked right into Alex's arms. Alex hugged him and gave him a hearty pat on his back. "Good boy, Bo." He stood. "Heel."

Bo fell into place at Alex's side, and they walked up the beach to the chain. Once it was on, Alex dropped to the sand and leaned back against his hands.

"Hi."

The sound of her voice caught him off guard. He turned and shaded his eyes to find her standing a few feet away. "Hi." He tried to use his tone to tell her he didn't want company.

"What's your dog's name?"

Alex felt the muscles in his jaw tense. "Bo."

"He's beautiful." She walked around in front of him and reached toward his dog. "Does he bite?"

If she only knew. "He's fine."

She was probably in her early twenties, a bleached blonde with a pale blue string bikini that matched her eyes. "I love German shepherds."

He didn't say anything. Other than a subtle admiration, Alex felt no thrill from her presence.

"I live down the beach a ways. Just seemed like a good day for a walk."

Alex squinted at her. "I guess."

She patted Bo a little more. "You want company?"

He smiled at her as politely as he could. The condition of his frozen heart wasn't her fault. "Honestly?"

"Sure." She tilted her head, her eyes catching the sunlight.

"My board's up there on the beach. I sort of wanted a few hours alone in the water."

Something in his voice must've hit its mark, because she straightened and took a step back. "Okay, then." Her smile told him she considered the move his loss. She shrugged one shoulder. "See you around."

"Yeah." He put one arm around Bo's back and felt his smile fall flat. "See ya." He watched her go, and for the few seconds it took the next set of waves to crash to the beach, she wasn't some stranger hitting on him, she was Holly, walking away. Leaving him for the last time, without looking back.

He stared at the distant horizon at the far end of the ocean. Wherever she was, he hoped she'd finally figured out how to make a break with the past. His mom insisted she was still in Los Angeles, working in real estate. But Alex doubted that. She had probably moved back to the East Coast by now, met some great guy who could love her wholeheartedly, the way she deserved to be loved. He'd certainly given her no reason to wait around for him in LA.

Alex looked down the beach again. When the blonde girl was far enough away, he walked up to the crest of sand, chained Bo to his bag, and poured him a bowl of water. The waves looked strong, bigger than before. He grabbed his surfboard, slipped off the shorts he wore over his swim trunks, and ran down the sand to the water. He could already feel the waves beneath him, and as he stretched onto his board and paddled out, he thought again of the REA. How could they believe setting a fire to anything would further their cause?

He moved past the first line of breakers to the place where the waves were three and four feet high and waited. Driving by the Oak Canyon Estates had been a good idea. Now he understood even more the urgency of the pending disaster. The firestorm would be like nothing this area had ever seen. He angled his board out to sea. A wave was forming, rising up out of the water and coming toward him. Alex paddled hard, positioning his board in just the right spot as the wave began to curl.

The thrust of power never got old. He kept himself tight, compact until he was sure of the ride. Then slowly he straightened his knees and gave himself to the wave. The wind and ocean spray blew against his face as he flew along,

tucked into the curl of water as he raced toward shore. In those few seconds, he experienced the same thing he felt when he ran hills at Pierce College. Relief from his driving passion for ridding the city of crime.

He surfed for nearly two hours, attacking the waves until he felt a relief he wasn't sure he understood. He ran his board back to the place where Bo was sleeping on the sand, grabbed his towel, and rubbed it over his arms and legs and through his hair. He and Bo were back in his Dodge heading out of the parking lot and south on Pacific Coast Highway when he thought of the REA again.

Never mind what Clay said. It wasn't against policy or illegal for him to keep an eye on the REA's headquarters. In fact, that's exactly where he would go tonight, after dark. He would drive up and watch, maybe place a call to Owl and tell him about some bogus tip the REA might like having. Then he'd ask about the Oak Canyon Estates, whether he could help or be a lookout. Something. He would work the guy, have a conversation, develop that crucial trust he'd need if he were to keep getting information.

Alex couldn't think of a better way to spend the night. If he couldn't wear a uniform, he could at least keep an eye on the bad guys. If there was danger in that, then so be it. His connection to the REA gave him a window to the group's activities. Because of what he'd learned, he could see the tragedy before it played out, the houses at the base of the hill in the path of the potential fire, the children who lived in the neighborhood. The death and destruction that could so easily lie ahead. He could imagine the firefighters rushing to the scene, running into the fire while everyone else ran out.

Just the way they'd done in the Twin Towers.

If only someone had been given a window before 9/11. Someone could've been looking for the al Qaeda terrorists at airports across the country, or even been aware of which airports they were planning to take off from that Tuesday morning. The terrorists could've been caught, and the Twin Towers would still be standing.

His father would still be alive.

Alex blinked back the dampness in his eyes. But there had been no window, no way Alex or anyone else could've helped his dad and the hundreds of others from the FDNY. That's what made the situation with the REA so intensely urgent. This window was real, and it belonged entirely to Alex. He felt himself tense up, holding tighter to the steering wheel. He would make sure these terrorists didn't cause the death of a single firefighter. He would watch them and be ready for them, and he'd keep Clay and the others updated. He would do what he hadn't been able to do for his father, protect innocent

civilians and firefighters. He would stop the REA, whatever it took.

Or he would die trying.

Hoofstuk 17

Alex ding homself om stadiger te ry, want as dit van die adrenalien in sy are afhang, sal hy nou jaag. Hy het so pas gedoen wat hy beplan het om vandag te doen. Hy het na Oak Canyon Estates gegaan om na die uitleg van die eiendom te gaan kyk en die gevaar te ondersoek.

Wat hy gesien het, het hom baie groot laat skrik.

Hy en Bo was nie lank daar nie, net lank genoeg om tot aan die einde van die straat en terug te ry. Maar hy het genoeg gesien om vir hom te wys wat 'n vuur so hoog in die heuwels kan doen. Dit sal nie al langs die straat af brand nie – dit sal daardeur ontplof. Die huise met houtrame en die konstruksiemateriaal sal soos vuurwerke in die lug opskiet, en die heuwels sal onmiddellik begin brand. Alex hoef nie baie van brande te weet om te besef dat so 'n vuurpoel met die bosse teen die heuwel af sal woed en binne minute 'n vuurstorm sal veroorsaak nie.

“Dit sal 'n vuur wees soos wat Los Angeles nog nooit vantevore gesien het nie.” Hy sê die woorde hardop en Bo huil agter hom. “Dis oukei, Bo. Ons sal nie toelaat dat dit gebeur nie. Ons sal die skelms vang.”

Bo blaf een keer skerp – soos hy opgelei is om te doen wanneer Alex die woord *skelms* gebruik. Dit is nog iets wat Bo van die ander honde onderskei. Hy deel Alex se passie om dinge te laat gebeur.

Aan die voet van die heuwel draai Alex twee keer na regs tot in 'n woonbuurt wat letterlik deur die berg omvou word. Die huise is op 'n stukkie grond gebou wat skaars groter as die fondasie daarvan is, met ongeveer drie meter tussen hulle. Hierdie tyd van die middag is kinders oraloer die buurt te sien – hulle ry fiets in die nou straat, speel basketbal in die oprit van een van die huise teen die heuwel, en loop saam met hulle ouers al langs die netjiese sypaadjies.

Alex ry deur die ontwikkeling, stadig genoeg om 'n paar cul-de-sac-strate te sien wat links en regs uit die pad loop. Die gevaar wat die plek inhou, slaan hom dronk. Daar is talle huise opmekaar op miskien twee of drie hektaar gebou, en daar is net twee uitgange. Twee uitgange vir die hele woonbuurt.

Hy verlaat die ontwikkeling en kom agter sy hande bewe. Die huise het wel teëldakke, maar dit sal nie 'n massiewe vuurbrander keer wat teen die heuwel af rol nie. Voeg winde daarby en 'n woonbuurt soos hierdie teen die voet van die heuwel sal heel ingesluk word – baie lewens is op die spel. Honderde. Hy rol al vier vensters af sodat hy kan asemhaal. Op die agterste sitplek hoor hy hoe Bo na die venster toe gaan en sy kop uitsteek. Hy is nog altyd lief daarvoor om dit te doen.

Die gesigte van Uil en die ander twee kom in sy gedagtes op, en hy voel weer

die woede, hoe dit hom dryf om iets te doen. Enigiets behalwe as om terug te sit en te wag dat Oak Canyon Estates 'n slagoffer van die ROA word. By die volgende verkeerslig gryp hy sy selfoon en bel vir Clay Michaels.

Clay antwoord net voor die oproep na sy stemposbus oorskakel. "Hoe gaan dit, Brady?" Hy praat hard om gehoor te word bo die lawaai. Dit klink of hy in 'n restaurant is.

"Iets groots gaan binnekort gebeur, Sersant. Ek moes bel."

"Hou 'n bietjie aan." Vir 'n oomblik is daar niks en dan klink dit of die geraas in die agtergrond effens wegsterf. "So, ja. Nou kan ek hoor. Sê weer?"

"Ons is op die punt om iets groots te sien gebeur ... Ek moes bel. Iemand moet iets hieraan doen."

Clay maak 'n bromgeluid wat hy probeer onderdruk. "Iets groots, sê jy? Wat nogal? 'n Brander? Sê vir my dis 'n brander, Brady, want jy is veronderstel om op die strand te wees, onthou jy?"

"Sersant, ek is ernstig." Alex het dit verwag om daaraan herinner te word dat hy nog 'n week oorhet voordat hy veronderstel is om aan polisiewerk te dink. Maar hy moet die inligting op die een of ander manier by die polisie uitkry. Hy gebruik die Bluetooth-opsie op sy foon; dus hou hy albei hande op die stuurwiel terwyl hy praat. "Ek het die leiers van die ROA ontmoet."

"Wat?" Clay praat harder, en dan dadelik sagter. "Wat bedoel jy? Het jy 'n groen T-hemp aangetrek en voorgegee jy haat bakkies?"

"Vir 'n paar minute, ja." Alex gee nie om om in die moeilikheid te kom nie. Hy het homself nie as 'n polisieman voorgedoen nie en niks teen die wet gedoen nie. "Onthou jy ek het vir jou van Uil vertel en dat ek met hom gepraat het?"

"Brady, jy is mal. Polisiemanne word nie gedurende hulle vrye tyd deel van terroriste-bendes nie. Niemand doen dit nie, en as hulle dit doen –"

"Wag! Dis belangrik." Alex het nog nooit kwaai met Clay gepraat nie, maar hy is nou baie naby daaraan. Hy haal nou vinniger asem as voorheen. "Hulle het nie geweet ek is 'n polisieman nie. Ons het by 'n park langs Kananweg ontmoet. Ek het die hele gesprek opgeneem. Die bandopnemer was agter in my broeksak en ek het alles opgeneem."

"Jy het *wat*?" Hierdie keer skree Clay die vraag uit. "Wat as hulle dit by jou gekry het? Hulle kon jou doodgemaak het, Brady." Hy is woedend. "Buitendien, jy wéét ons sal dit nie kan gebruik nie."

"Ja, ek is bewus daarvan." Alex se stem is nou weer vol respek. "Ek probeer nie bewyse vir 'n saak kry nie; ek probeer om 'n tragedie te keer voordat dit gebeur."

Clay sê niks nie, asof Alex se woorde uiteindelik tot hom deurgedring het. "Nou goed dan ... Wat het jy uitgevind?"

"Baie. Hulle volgende teiken is Oak Canyon Estates." Alex probeer sy emosies onder beheer bring. Hy is nou halfpad met Las Virgenes-weg op pad Malibu toe. Hy het sy branderplank agter in die bakkie, want hy is regtig van plan om vanaand te gaan branderplank ry. Die uitstappie na Oak Canyon

Estates was op sy pad. Hy kon dit net nie weerstaan om na die ontwikkeling te gaan kyk nie.

“Is dit wat hulle gesê het?”

“Ja.” Alex leun terug en vryf vir Bo, maar hy bly na die golwende canyon kyk. “Gaan kyk asseblief. Hoor of enigiemand van die ontwikkeling al die polisie gebel het. Ek reken die ROA is besig om hulle te dreig. Dit is min of meer soos hulle te werk gaan.”

“Is jy seker van jou saak?”

“Absoluut. Ek het nou net na die ontwikkeling toe gery. Sersant, dis verskriklik. Die huise is in die middel van ’n oopte gebou en word omring deur baie hoë bosse. En teen die voet van die heuwel is honderde huise. Ek bedoel, as die wind reg waai, gaan die hele woonbuurt afbrand en die helfte van die mense wat daar bly, sal sterf.”

Hierdie keer is Clay vir ’n hele rukkie stil. “Weet jy wat het ek gedink toe ek jou naam op my selfoon se skerm sien?” Hy klink skielik moeg. “Ek het gedink: ‘Wil jy nou meer. Alex Brady staan ’n tydjie af terwyl hy saam met sy ma deur Central Park stap om my geluk te wens met my verjaarsdag.’”

Alex onthou die geluide in die agtergrond wat soos ’n restaurant geklink het.

“Jy verjaar?”

“Ja.”

“O.” Alex sit weer albei sy hande op die stuurwiel. Daar is nie baie verkeer op die pad in die canyon nie, maar hy hou daarvan om totaal in beheer te wees vir die laaste paar draaie. “Veels geluk.”

“Dankie.” Hy sug. “Ons het al hieroor gepraat. Dié tyd van die jaar is die risiko vir veldbrande algemeen in Los Angeles, en dit wat jy gehoor het, is dalk niks anders as vals leidrade nie.”

“Dit voel nie so nie.”

“Goed dan. So ... jy wil hê ek moet kyk of die ontwikkelaar enige klagtes ingedien het, en wat dan? Lost Hills aansê om elke uur mense uit te stuur om die plek te patroleer?”

“So iets.” Alex glimlag nie. Daar is niks lighartigs aan die situasie nie.

“Ek sê jou wat, Brady. Ek sal dit opvolg as jy vir my iets sal doen.” Die geraas in die agtergrond word weer harder.

“Wat is dit?”

“Gaan lê in die son.” Hy moet nou bo die lawaai om hom praat om gehoor te word. “Jy doen niks meer speurwerk tydens jou vakansie nie, Brady. Dit kan jou dood veroorsaak. Verstaan jy?”

“Ja, Meneer.”

“Goed dan. Ek sal jou laat weet as ek iets hoor.”

Toe hy sy foon neersit, ontspan Alex effens. Clay is ’n man van sy woord. As hy sê hy sal iets opvolg, sal hy. En as hy uitvind dat die ontwikkelaar wel gebel het om dreigemente van brandstigting aan te meld, tesame met Alex se leidraad, dan is dit geregverdig om elke uur ’n polisieman na die ontwikkeling te stuur. Wat dit ook al verg om die huise en die heuwels en die inwoners te

beskerm.

En die brandweermanne wat die groot brand sal moet bestry as dit uitbreek. Hy is by Pacific Coast-hoofweg en draai hierdie keer regs. Malibu is te besig hierdie tyd van die dag; daarom ry hy noord na Zuma-strand en parkeer met sy neus in die rigting van die strand, weg van die ingang. Hy kyk na die leë strand wat voor hom uitgestrek lê en die branders wat inrol. Dit is net na drie-uur, die perfekte tyd om branderplank te ry. Hy maak vir Bo oop om uit te klim en maak 'n leiband aan sy halsband vas. Bo is heeltemal betroubaar sonder 'n leiband, maar as enigiemand verby sou loop, kan 'n Duitse Herdershond soos hy baie intimiderend wees. Die leiband help.

Alex trek sy T-hemp uit en kry sy branderplank. Dit is baie warm, selfs hier by die strand; daarom vat hy 'n vol waterhouer asook 'n sak met Bo se bak en 'n handdoek. Clay hoef nie bekommerd te wees nie. Hy is alreeds bruin gebrand nadat hy die afgelope twee middae hier was. Die strand help om die tyd verby te kry, maar hy gaan mal raak as hy nog 'n week moet wag voor hy sy uniform kan aantrek.

Bo is baie lief vir die water, maar sy kop moet net nie nat word nie. Toe Alex sy goed neergesit het, loop hy saam met sy hond na waar die branders breek en maak hom los. Bo baljaar vir 'n entjie al langs die skuimerige water, en hardloop dan terug na Alex. Sy oë kyk op na Alex asof hy sê: “Kom speel met my.”

Toe Alex lag, trek sy maagspiere saam. “Wil jy speel? Is dit wat jy wil doen, my hond?”

Bo blaf een keer. Die manier hoe hy sy mond trek laat dit lyk of hy glimlag.

Daar is niemand in sig nie en Alex vou die leiband in 'n bondeltjie en gooi dit op die klam sand neer. Dan hardloop hy agter Bo aan, in die rigting van die vlak water. Elke paar tree spat hy die hond nat, en dan draai Bo om en jaag hom. Die speletjie kom tot 'n einde toe Alex 'n meisie in 'n bikini in hulle rigting aangehardloop sien kom. Hy kniel en hou sy arms uit na sy hond. “Kom hierso, Bo.”

Onmiddellik swaai hy sy stert en loop reguit na Alex toe. Alex omhels hom en vryf sy rug liefdevol. “Mooi so, Bo.” Hy staan op. “Sit.”

Bo gaan sit langs Alex, en dan loop hulle na waar die leiband op die strand lê. Toe dit om Bo se nek is, gaan sit Alex op die sand en leun terug op sy hande. “Haai.”

Die klank van haar stem betrap hom onkant. Hy draai in haar rigting en hou sy hand voor sy oë om die son te keer. Sy staan net 'n paar tree weg. “Haai.” Hy probeer met 'n stemtoon praat wat vir haar sal sê hy wil alleen wees.

“Wat is jou hond se naam?”

Alex voel hoe die spiertjies in sy wange styf trek. “Bo.”

“Hy is pragtig.” Sy loop voor hom verby om aan die hond te vat. “Sal hy my byt?”

As sy maar net weet hoe hy kán byt. “Nee wat.”

Sy is waarskynlik in haar vroeë twintigs, 'n blondkop met 'n ligte blou

bikini, dieselfde kleur as haar oë. “Ek hou baie van Duitse Herdershonde.” Hy reageer nie daarop nie. Anders as ’n subtiele bewondering, voel Alex niks in haar teenwoordigheid nie.

“Ek bly hier langs die strand. Dit het na ’n lekker dag gelyk om te gaan stap.”

Alex trek sy oë op skrefies terwyl hy na haar kyk. “Ja, dit is nogal.”

Sy vryf Bo nog ’n keer. “Kan ek maar hier sit en ’n bietjie met jou gesels?”

Hy glimlag vir haar so vriendelik as wat hy kan. Die feit dat sy hart hard is, is nie haar skuld nie. “Moet ek eerlik wees?”

“Ja.” Sy draai haar kop skuins, haar oë blink.

“My branderplank lê daar op die strand. Ek wou eintlik ’n paar uur alleen in die water deurgebring het.”

Iets in sy stem moes haar laat verstaan het, want sy staan op en tree terug.

“Goed dan.” Haar glimlag sê vir hom dat sy reken dit is sy verlies. Sy haal een skouer op. “Sien weer.”

“Ja.” Hy sit sy een arm om Bo se nek en voel hoe sy glimlag verdwyn. “Sien jou.” Hy kyk hoe sy wegloop en solank dit die volgende brander neem om op die strand te breek, is sy nie die een of ander vreemdeling wat vir hom ogies gemaak het nie, maar Holly wat wegloop. Wat hom vir die laaste keer agterlaat sonder om terug te kyk.

Hy staar na die horison in die verte. Waar sy haar ook al bevind, hy hoop sy het uiteindelik besef hoe om van die verlede afskeid te neem. Sy ma het gesê sy is steeds in Los Angeles en werk as eiendomsagent. Maar Alex glo nie so nie. Sy het waarskynlik teen hierdie tyd teruggetrek Ooskus toe, ’n wonderlike man ontmoet wat haar met sy hele hart kan liefhê, soos sy verdien om liefgehê te word. Hy het vir seker vir haar geen rede gegee om vir hom in Los Angeles te wag nie.

Alex kyk weer met die strand af. Toe die blonde meisie ver genoeg weg is, loop hy tot aan die bokant van die strand, maak Bo aan sy sak vas en gooi vir hom water in sy bak. Die branders lyk sterk, groter as ’n rukkie terug. Hy tel sy branderplank op, trek die kortbroek uit wat hy oor sy swembroek aan het, en hardloop oor die sand tot in die water. Hy voel reeds die branders onder hom, en toe hy op sy bord gaan lê en dieper in roei, dink hy weer aan die ROA. Hoe kan hulle dink dat brandstigting hulle saak enigsins gaan bevorder? Hy roei verby die eerste paar branders na die plek waar die branders een en twee meter hoog is, dan wag hy. Om by Oak Canyon Estates ’n draai te gaan maak het, was ’n goeie plan. Nou verstaan hy die dringendheid van die ramp wat wag om te gebeur selfs beter. Die vuurstorm sal iets wees wat hierdie area nog nooit vantevore gesien het nie. Hy draai sy bord skuins teen die branders. ’n Brander is besig om te vorm, styg uit bo die water en is op pad na hom toe. Alex roei vinnig, draai sy bord presies in die regte rigting toe die brander begin krul.

Die dryfkrag is elke keer verfrissend. Hy hou sy lyf sterk, sy spiere saamgetrek, totdat hy seker is hy kan opstaan. Dan maak hy sy knieë stadig reguit en gee homself oor aan die brander. Die wind en seesproei waai teen sy

gesig terwyl hy ry, toegevou in die waterkrul, vinnig op pad strand se kant toe. In daardie paar oomblikke ervaar hy dieselfde gevoel as wanneer hy die bultjies by Pierce College uithardloop. Bevry van sy passie om die stad teen misdaad te beskerm.

Hy ry vir byna twee uur lank branderplank, val die branders aan totdat hy 'n verligting voel wat hy nie seker is hy verstaan nie. Hy hardloop met sy branderplank terug na waar Bo op die sand lê en slaap, kry sy handdoek en vryf dit oor sy arms, bene en hare. Hy en Bo is terug in sy bakkie en besig om by die parkeerarea uit te ry, suid op Pacific Coast-hoofweg, toe hy weer aan die ROA dink.

Maak nie saak wat Clay sê nie. Dit is nie teen die beleid of onwettig om 'n ogie oor die ROA se hoofkwartier te hou nie. Om die waarheid te sê, dit is presies waarheen hy vanaand gaan gaan as dit donker is. Hy sal soontoe ry en dinge gaan dophou, miskien vir Uil bel en vir hom kamma inligting gee waarvan die ROA sal hou. Dan sal hy uitvaar oor Oak Canyon Estates, of hy kan help of 'n spioen kan wees. Enigiets. Hy sal die man mak maak, met hom 'n gesprek voer, daardie belangrike vertroue bou wat hy nodig het om gereeld inligting te kry.

Alex kan aan geen beter manier dink om die aand deur te bring nie. As hy nie 'n uniform kan dra nie, kan hy ten minste 'n ogie oor die slegte ouens hou. As dit enige gevaar inhou, is dit nou maar so. Sy verbinding met die ROA gee vir hom 'n kykie in die groep se aktiwiteite. As gevolg van die inligting wat hy gekry het, kan hy die tragedie sien afspeel voor dit gebeur: die huise aan die voet van die heuwel in die pad van die moontlike vuur, die kinders wat in die woonbuurt bly, die dood en vernietiging wat kan voorlê. Hy kan hom die brandweermanne voorstel wat hulle na die toneel haas, hoe hulle tot in die vuur hardloop terwyl ander mense uit die vuur kom.

Net soos hulle by die Twin Towers gedoen het.

As iemand maar net kon weet wat op 11 September sou gebeur. Iemand kon op die uitkyk gewees het vir die Al Qaeda-terroriste by lughawens oor die hele land, of selfs weet van watter lughawens hulle van plan was om daardie Dinsdagoggend op te styg. Die terroriste kon gevang geword het, en die Twin Towers kon steeds gestaan het.

Sy pa sou steeds geleef het.

Alex knip sy oë en voel dit is effens nat. Maar niemand het geweet nie, daar was geen manier dat Alex of enigiemand anders sy pa en die honderde ander brandweermanne kon help nie. Dit is wat die situasie met die ROA so verskriklik dringend maak. Alex beskik oor inligting waarvan net hy weet. Hy voel hoe die spanning in hom opbou, en hy vat die stuurwiel stywer vas. Hy sal seker maak dat hierdie terroriste nie die dood van 'n enkele brandweerman veroorsaak nie. Hy sal hulle dophou en gereed wees vir hulle, en hy sal Clay en die ander op hoogte hou. Hy sal doen wat hy nie vir sy pa kon doen nie: om onskuldige burgers en brandweermanne te beskerm. Hy sal die ROA keer, maak nie saak wat dit kos nie. Of hy sal sterf in 'n poging om hulle te keer.

EIGHTEEN

Clay had a strange feeling when he woke up, an uneasiness that Alex was right — that something big was on the brink, some drug bust or hostage situation. Or maybe the fire Alex was worried about. In his years of working in law enforcement, a number of times God had impressed upon him an urgency or higher degree of alertness when he was entering a day that would require his very best. As he ate breakfast with Jamie and CJ and Sierra and as he dressed in his olive green uniform, he had that feeling today.

Or maybe it was just the wind.

They were a little more than a week into October, and sometime before dawn the Santa Ana winds kicked up with a vengeance. All morning he could hear them rushing through the trees out front, the haunting whistle signaling the sort of wind that could rip tree branches and down power lines. Once he hit the road for work, the force of the wind became easy to see. Strong and relentless, the steady gusts powered their way through the trees, bending them to one side and pushing against his car. Already some debris lined the gutters and sidewalks.

Unless the wind let up, there would be fires today. Anyone who had lived in LA more than a few years knew that much. Some might come from careless cigarettes tossed from passing cars or from a campfire left untended. Others would be set by kids messing around. But without a doubt, this was a day that could easily attract the REA.

The feeling of something big was still with Clay when he reached work, so he did something he often did after he parked just outside headquarters. He took the small Bible from the console between the front two seats and opened it to the last place he'd been reading. Proverbs. So much about life in that book. Clay was constantly amazed at the simple lessons provided in every chapter. He read a few paragraphs from chapter eighteen, then he turned back to the fourteenth chapter, to the place where he'd found the verse that had shouted to him about Alex Brady.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads only to death.

He still hadn't shared the verse with Alex, but if the REA chose today to act on some of their threats, this was one day they could all use wisdom from God. Especially Alex. Clay looked at the verse once more. The kid was crazy, infiltrating into a volatile gang like the REA. The members weren't known for their violence against people, but if they figured out Alex was a sheriff's deputy, who knew what they might do? Whether he was armed or not, they could've overtaken him, found his recorder and his guns, and used them on him.

Today was Alex's first day back at work. Clay exhaled slowly and closed his Bible. Alex meant well. The guy was already a legend in the department, a hero by any definition of the word. He had a passion for solving crime, catching crooks, and eliminating a problem before it came to pass. All admirable qualities for a deputy. But Alex had to be careful not to take his passion to an obsessive level. If Clay could find a minute alone with him today, he'd tell him about the verse, about the fact that he'd been praying for him to find the kind of peace that couldn't come from any amount of fighting crime.

Clay went inside and found Joe in the break room adding sugar to his coffee. Alex wouldn't be in for another few hours — since K9 guys mostly worked the later shifts. Clay lifted a cup from the stack and was filling it when he heard the radio in the corner crackle and an urgent voice come through the speaker.

The call was an APB to all departments. A fire had been set at a new housing development. Two homes were on fire, igniting a blazing section of brush. Ten acres already. There were reports of people being evacuated in neighborhoods near the fire, and of at least three residents trapped by the flames. All fire stations in the area were responding. Witnesses described a light green Honda hybrid leaving the scene and heading south on the Ventura Freeway.

Clay and Joe moved closer to the radio. "All deputies be on the lookout," the voice ordered. "Suspect driving the Honda appears to be a Caucasian male, medium build with ..."

The description went on, but Clay could hardly focus. He felt his heart skip a beat and then slam into double-time. Had the REA finally acted on its threats and attacked the Oak Canyon Estates? Clay stood motionless, waiting for more information while his mind raced.

"Alex warned us." Joe leaned his shoulder into the wall and stared at Clay. "You followed up on it, right?"

"Of course." Clay sat on the edge of the closest table and tried to think if he'd

missed anything. He'd checked for reports from the developer and found several — each one claiming a threat of arson. Clay had personally assured the guy that the department was aware of the danger, and that they'd have deputies drive by often to keep an eye on the place. He rested his forearm on his thigh, frustrated. "I talked to Lost Hills and asked them to patrol the area. Not much else we could've done."

Before Joe could add anything, the radio came to life again with the address of the development, a new neighborhood in the hills west of Pasadena. The woman rattled off a few other details and finished with the one that told the most:

A flag had been left at the scene with the letters REA.

Clay took a deep breath and stood again. He silently prayed that one of the deputies would catch the guy, but he couldn't keep himself from feeling somewhat relieved. To have a fire set in broad daylight at a location where they'd already been warned would be frustrating and embarrassing, both. "So much for Alex's tip."

"Not a surprise, really. They might've noticed the extra patrol at Oak Canyon Estates. Maybe changed their target because of that."

"True. Or maybe they never trusted Alex from the beginning. Told him the wrong location on purpose."

The SWAT guys had talked about the fire threat — not just from the REA but from all sources. There was no way to patrol every remote area or every hillside cluster of homes — not with crime still breaking out on the valley floors.

Clay walked to the window and stared toward the west. Already the tell-tale smoke darkened a section of the distant sky. If the wind here was similar to the conditions up on the mountain, it would be a long day for firefighters. Joe came alongside him. "Kind of eerie, the wind today."

"The fire's gonna be a big one, hard to contain." He tried to imagine the sick strategy of a group like the REA. "There could be more targets today."

"Got that right." Joe breathed in sharp and slipped his hands in his pockets. "Make a call to Lost Hills. Be sure they send a deputy up to patrol the Oak Canyon Estates." Concern showed in his eyes. "With half our firefighters up in Pasadena, what better time to hit it?"

The wind howled outside, and in the distance the cloud of smoke grew. Fire danger hadn't been this high in two decades, and across the city firefighters and law enforcement had prepared for what could be devastating fires. With a

group like the REA out there, there was a citywide awareness that the devastation could be worse than anything they'd seen before. Clay had a feeling that wherever Alex was, he knew about the fire by now, and he was probably already on his way in.

Looking for a light green hybrid Honda as if his life depended on it.



When Alex woke up and heard the wind, he immediately called his sergeant and asked for an okay on overtime. He'd already shared with him his taped conversation with Owl and the other two REA guys. His sergeant wasn't as concerned as Clay had been. After all, Alex was part of the task force assigned to the REA, and he'd done the research on his own time, not as a representative of the sheriff's department — so he hadn't needed permission. There wasn't enough information for an arrest, but if a case was ever built around the ecoterrorists, the tape could help.

The sergeant sounded grateful for his call. "It's already busy around here, Brady. Get in when you can."

Wind made people do crazy things. Not just setting fires, but committing bank robberies and assaults. As if the whipping of the trees and the driving gusts didn't only set people on edge, but pushed them over. In addition to the threat of fires, there would be more of the common troubles today, for sure.

Alex parked his truck, changed into his uniform, and he and Bo climbed into the squad car just after nine in the morning. As soon as he turned on his radio, he heard the news. A fire had been set at a housing development — but not Oak Canyon Estates. Some place outside of Pasadena. The part that mattered, though, was that witnesses had seen a suspect leave the site of the arson.

He was halfway to the estates when he got a call for backup. An elderly woman in Calabasas had been calling 9-1-1 all morning needing help with about a hundred soldiers who were milling about her backyard and wouldn't leave. He and another deputy were closest to the woman's house, so the call was theirs.

Alex huffed his frustration. The woman had called in the same complaint before. Everyone at the Lost Hills station knew about her and the delusional concerns that drove her to call for emergency help. Cats covering her roof ... aliens landing in her kitchen ... plants overtaking the house ... and now this. He'd never responded to a call at her house, but from what he heard in the Lost Hills break room, the deputies never accomplished anything, never solved the problem.

He flipped on his lights and sped down the 101 Freeway a few exits. A call like this was a waste of time when the arson risk was so high. He drove as fast as he could, and in ten minutes he reached the small, neighborhood home where the old woman lived. One of the Lost Hills deputies was already there, waiting in his car. Alex left the air conditioning on for Bo, cracked the window, and went to meet the other deputy, one of the newest in the department, a guy named Scheidel.

“You know the old girl. She’s loony,” Scheidel shrugged. “Not sure what we can do but check it out.”

Alex felt his stress level double. He wanted to be back on the road, looking for the suspect, driving up to the Oak Canyon Estates before the REA struck again. He steadied himself and nodded for the deputy to join him. “Let’s do it.”

They didn’t quite reach the door when it flew open. Standing there was a frail, white-haired woman, her face stricken with fear. She clung to her oversized house jacket, and her arms and legs shook. “They’re everywhere! Everywhere, I tell you!” She stepped onto the porch and grabbed hold of Alex’s arm. “Help me, young man! Please help me!”

Alex stiffened and started to take a step back. Nobody touched him on a call, not for any reason. But then he stopped himself. The woman wasn’t going to hurt him, and something about the terror in her face touched him. The feeling was strangely unfamiliar, and he couldn’t help but wonder how his father would’ve handled the situation. “Ma’am, calm down.” Alex put his hand on her shoulder. “What seems to be the problem?”

“Soldiers! They’re everywhere!” She was panting now, on the verge of hyperventilating. “Get them out!”

His partner stepped up. “Show us where they are, okay?”

“This way.” She remained at Alex’s side, clutching him, her whole body trembling. They walked through a cluttered living room to a patio door off the kitchen. The woman waved her hand at her backyard, a patch of overgrown grass and weeds surrounded on all sides by a rotting wooden fence. “See?” She tried to hide behind Alex. “Soldiers everywhere!”

“Ma’am, come here right now.” Scheidel’s tone grew stern, his patience pressed. When she peered out from behind Alex, he motioned for her to come closer. “Now, ma’am.” He jabbed his finger at a spot on the floor beside him. “Right here.”

The woman seemed stricken at the idea of leaving Alex’s side, but she took

three shaky steps toward Scheidel and cast frantic eyes at him. Her voice was a pathetic whine. “Make them go.” She clutched at Scheidel now and squeezed her eyes shut. “Please, make them go!”

Scheidel shook his arm free. He pointed to the backyard. “Ma’am, open your eyes and look out there.”

It took her a few seconds, but finally she opened her eyes the slightest crack. As if she were really seeing something, her eyes darted from one side of the yard to the other. “They won’t leave!”

“Ma’am,” Scheidel lowered his voice to the methodical, patronizing tone typically reserved for young children and dogs. “There are no soldiers in your backyard. Not one single soldier.”

She was shaking harder now, her gaze glued to the things her mind was seeing in the backyard. “Yes ... a hundred of them.” Her frantic eyes found Scheidel again. “I counted.”

Something about the scene tugged at Alex, the way most calls never did. She looked harried and helpless, like the victims walking the outer edges of a disaster. The way people looked after 9/11. Suddenly, he had an idea. He touched the woman’s shoulder again. “I’ll get rid of them, but I need your help.”

The first sign of hope softened her features. She was still out of breath, panicked by whatever she was seeing.

“Follow me out here onto the patio.”

She started to shake her head. “But they — “

“Ma’am, if you want them to leave, you need to help me.”

The woman seemed to summon all the courage of a lifetime. Alex walked outside first, and slowly she followed. When she was on the patio with a clear view of the yard, Alex stopped her. “Stay right here.”

“Brady ...” Scheidel held up his hands as if to tell him not to feed into the woman’s craziness.

But Alex signaled the deputy that he had the situation under control. Then he took a few determined strides onto the grass and put his hands on hips. “All right, men, listen up! I want all of you in a straight line right now.” He barked the orders loud enough that his voice carried across the yard. Again, he could almost feel his father’s approval as he shouted, “First soldier over here!” He pointed to the left, where a wobbly gate provided the only exit. “The rest of

you fall in behind him. Everyone!”

From the corner of his eye he saw the woman put her hand over her mouth, her eyes wide.

“Okay,” Alex walked to the gate, carefully opened it so it wouldn’t fall off its hinges, then returned to his spot near the woman. “When I give the command, you march out that gate and don’t come back. I’ll count you off. Ready ...” He pointed to a spot near the open gate. “One ... two ... three. Keep it moving, men. Four ... five ...”

The woman turned her head with each number, watching the imaginary soldiers slowly leave her yard. Alex kept counting, through the twenties and thirties and on into the seventies and eighties. As he reached the end, he forced his tone to sound even more stern. “Ninety-eight ... No stragglers! Ninety-nine ... one hundred.” He went back to the gate and yelled, “Don’t come back, or I’ll arrest every one of you.”

He walked to the woman and found her gripping Scheidel, who had stepped out onto the patio beside her. She was weeping openly, the fear and trembling gone. As Alex came to her, she reached out and touched him, her wet eyes shining with admiration. “Thank you, sir. You saved me! Thank you!”

They spent another couple minutes reassuring her, then went back to their cars out front. The whole thing hadn’t taken more than ten minutes, and Scheidel chuckled as they walked. “That was brilliant, man. Absolutely brilliant.”

“Figured maybe it would help if someone took her seriously.” He shrugged one shoulder. “You’ll make the report, right?”

“Should be a keeper. A hundred soldiers cleared out. Mission accomplished.”

Before he left, Alex saw the woman waving at them from her front porch. Again, his heart went out to her. He waved back and took off toward the freeway. A few minutes later, he heard the report. Another fire was burning at a housing development — this one in Malibu. The hills adjacent to the area were already burning, and firefighters as far as three hours north in Santa Maria were being called in to help. Arson was suspected again, and this time there were no witnesses. The fires were far apart, which would stretch the fire departments in the area, and with the winds, the dangers that day were only just being realized.

He drove as fast as he could without sirens and lights to the winding road that led up to the Oak Canyon Estates. Without hesitating, he drove up and onto the main street, the one where all the houses in this phase sat. He turned right and cruised slowly to the end. A few work vans were parked outside one

house, and a pair of well-dressed men with hard hats were talking to a construction worker. Alex nodded at them as he drove by, and at the end of the street he turned around and drove to the other side. The model house in the middle had just one car parked out front, and past that were more work trucks.

Alex fought back his frustration as he headed back down the steep road. The place should have a guard, at least. Someone to screen visitors. He'd checked with Clay, and the suggestion had been talked about with the developers. Apparently, they were in the process of hiring a security company. Alex scanned the horizon and saw the two gray-black areas that marked the separate brush fires. The wind kicked up a dust cloud in front of him, and he squinted to see through it.

Sometimes he felt like the old woman from the earlier call, shouting for someone to believe him that the fires this year could kill people. They could kill firefighters. But after today, he was bound to feel the same relief the woman felt. Because based on the way the day was going so far, no one could argue about whether the REA was setting fires in new housing developments. They could argue just one thing:

When was it going to happen at Oak Canyon Estates?

Hoofstuk 18

Clay het 'n snaakse gevoel toe hy wakker word, 'n ongemaklikheid dat Alex reg is – dat iets groots gaan gebeur, dwelmhandel wat oopgekras gaan word of 'n gyselaarsdrama wat gaan afspeel. Of miskien die brand waaroor Alex bekommerd is. In al die jare wat hy vir die polisie werk, het God al 'n hele paar keer 'n dringendheid of 'n sterker waaksaamheid by hom laat ontstaan wanneer hy 'n dag tegemoetgegaan het wat al sy krag vereis. Toe hy saam met Jamie, CJ en Sierra ontbyt eet, en toe hy sy uniform aantrek, het hy daardie gevoel.

Of miskien is dit net die wind.

Oktobermaand is net meer as 'n week oud, en net voor sonsopkoms het die Santa Ana-winde woes begin waai. Die hele oggend hoor hy dit deur die bome in die voortuin suis, die fluitgeluid van winde wat boomtakke kan breek en kragdrade grond toe kan bring. Toe hy werk toe ry, kan hy die krag van die wind sien. Die wind waai sterker en onverbiddelik deur die bome, buig dit na die een kant toe en druk teen sy motor. Daar lê alreeds takke, blare en vullis in die vore en op die sypaadjies.

Tensy die wind gaan lê, gaan daar vandag beslis brande wees. Enigiemand wat vir 'n paar jaar in Los Angeles bly, weet dit. Party brande sal ontstaan as gevolg van sigarette wat nalatig by motors uitgegooi word of as gevolg van kampvure wat nie geblus word nie. Ander sal gestig word deur kinders wat

kattakwaad aanvang. Maar vandag is 'n dag wat sonder twyfel die ROA se aandag sal trek.

Clay het steeds 'n vreemde gevoel toe hy by die werk kom; daarom doen hy iets wat hy gereeld doen nadat hy sy motor net buite die hoofkantoor geparkeer het. Hy haal die klein Bybeltjie uit die armleuning tussen die twee voorste sitplekke en maak dit oop by die plek waar hy die laaste keer gelees het. Spreuke. Daar is soveel oor die lewe in dié boek. Clay staan gereeld in verwondering oor die eenvoudige lesse wat in elke hoofstuk geleer word. Hy lees 'n paar paragrawe uit hoofstuk 18, en blaai dan na hoofstuk 14, na die teksvers wat hom aan Alex Brady laat dink het.

“Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; agterna kom dit uit dat dit na die dood gelei het.” Hy het nog steeds nie die teksvers met Alex gedeel nie, maar as die ROA vandag kies om van hul dreigemente uit te voer, is dit die dag wat hulle almal kan doen met God se wysheid. Veral Alex. Clay lees die teksvers vir 'n laaste keer. Die jong man is gek om die binnekringe van 'n wispelturige bende te betree. Die lede is nie bekend vir hulle geweld teen mense nie, maar wie weet waartoe hulle in staat is as hulle uitvind Alex is 'n polisieman? Of hy nou gewapen was of nie, hulle kon hom oorval het, sy bandopnemer en gewere gekry het, en dit teen hom gebruik het.

Vandag is Alex se eerste dag terug by die werk. Clay asem stadig uit en maak sy Bybel toe. Alex bedoel goed. Die man is alreeds 'n legende by die polisiestasie, deur en deur 'n held. Hy het 'n passie om misdaad te beveg, skelms te vang en 'n probleem uit te skakel voordat dit een word. Dit alles is bewonderenswaardige kwaliteite vir 'n polisieman. Maar Alex moet versigtig wees om nie 'n obsessie van sy passie te maak nie. As Clay hom vandag vir 'n oomblik alleen kan kry, sal hy die teksvers met hom deel, asook dat hy vir hom bid om die tipe vrede te vind wat nie verkry kan word deur misdaad te beveg nie.

Clay gaan in en kry vir Joe in die teekamer waar hy suiker in sy koffie gooi. Alex sal eers oor 'n paar uur hier wees – polisiemanne van die honde-eenheid werk gewoonlik die later skofte. Clay tel 'n beker van die tafel af op en terwyl hy dit vol gooi, hoor hy iets oor die radio in die hoek. 'n Desperate stem kan aan die ander kant gehoor word.

Dit is 'n dringende oproep aan alle polisiestasies. 'n Brand is gestig by 'n nuwe ontwikkeling. Twee huise is aan die brand, en die vuur versprei na die veld. Vier hektaar is reeds besig om te brand. Daar is berigte dat mense besig is om hulle huise te ontruim in nabygeleë woonbuurtes, en drie inwoners is reeds vasgevang deur die vuur. Alle brandweerstasies in die area is op pad. Ooggetuies het 'n ligte groen Honda Hybrid die toneel sien verlaat waarna dit in 'n suidelike rigting op die Ventura-deurpad gery het.

Clay en Joe beweeg nader aan die radio. “Alle polisieledes moet op die uitkyk wees,” beveel die stem. “Die verdagte wat die Honda bestuur, lyk of hy 'n Kaukasiër is, gemiddelde liggaamsbou en ... ”

Die beskrywing gaan voort, maar Clay kan skaars fokus. Hy voel hoe sy hart

vinniger begin klop. Het die ROA uiteindelik tot aksie oorgegaan en die Oak Canyon Estates aangeval? Clay staan doodstil, wag vir meer inligting terwyl sy kop oortyd werk.

“Alex het ons gewaarsku.” Joe leun met sy skouer teen die muur en staar na Clay. “Jy het dit opgevolg, nie waar nie?”

“Natuurlik.” Clay gaan sit op die rand van die naaste tafel en probeer dink of hy iets gemis het. Hy het gekyk of die ontwikkelaar enige klagtes ingedien het en het ’n paar gekry – almal dreigemente van brandstigting. Clay het die man persoonlik gerusgestel dat die polisie bewus is van die gevaar, en gereeld polisiemanne daarheen sal stuur om ’n ogie oor die plek te hou. Hy rus gefrustreerd met sy voorarm op sy bobeen. “Ek het met Lost Hills gepraat en hulle gevra om die area te patrolleer. Ons kon nie regtig meer gedoen het nie.” Voordat Joe iets kan sê, is daar weer iets oor die radio. Die adres van die ontwikkeling word gegee. Dit is ’n nuwe woonbuurt in die heuwels wes van Pasadena. Die vrou rammel ’n paar ander besonderhede af en sluit af met iets baie belangrik: Daar is ’n vlag met die letters ROA daarop op die toneel gekry.

Clay asem diep in en staan op. Hy bid saggies dat een van die polisiemanne die man vang, maar hy kan nie help om effens verlig te voel nie. As daar helder oordag ’n brand gestig sou word by ’n plek waaroor hulle alreeds gewaarsku is, sal dit frustrerend wees en die polisie laat skaam kry. “Lyk my nie Alex se leidraad het gehelp nie.”

“Dit is nie regtig ’n verrassing nie. Hulle het dalk agtergekom dat Oak Canyon Estates meer gereeld gepatrolleer word. Miskien het hulle hul teiken as gevolg daarvan verander.”

“Dis waar. Of miskien het hulle Alex van die begin af nie vertrou nie. Met opset die verkeerde plek vir hom genoem.”

Die SWAT-lede het al oor die dreigement gepraat – nie net oor dié van die ROA nie, maar ook ander. Daar is geen manier dat hulle elke afgeleë of heuwelagtige gebied waar woonbuurte voorkom, kan patrolleer nie. Nie met misdaad wat steeds in die valleie plaasvind nie.

Clay loop na die venster en staar na die weste. Die verraderlike rook kan alreeds in die verte gesien word. As die wind op die berg dieselfde is as hier, gaan dit ’n lang dag vir die brandweermanne wees. Joe kom staan langs hom. “Die wind is vandag nogal onheilspellend.”

“Die vuur gaan groot wees, moeilik om te beheer.” Hy probeer homself die siek strategie van ’n groep soos die ROA indink. “Daar kan vandag meer teikens wees.”

“Jy is reg.” Joe asem vinnig in en steek sy hande in sy sakke. “Bel vir Lost Hills. Maak seker hulle stuur ’n polisieman om Oak Canyon Estates te patrolleer.” Hy lyk bekommerd. “Met die helfte van die brandweer in Pasadena, is daar nie ’n beter tyd om daarop toe te slaan nie.”

Die wind huil buite en in die verte word die rookwolk groter. Vir die afgelope twee dekades was die brandgevaar nog nie so groot nie, en in die hele stad het

die brandweer en polisie hulleself voorberei op verwoestende vure. Met 'n groep soos die ROA, is die hele stad bewus daarvan dat die vernietiging erger kan wees as enigiets wat hulle vantevore gesien het. Clay het 'n gevoel dat waar Alex homself ook al bevind, hy reeds van die vuur weet, en waarskynlik op pad werk toe is.

En op die uitkyk vir 'n groen Honda Hybrid asof sy lewe daarvan afhang.

★

Toe Alex wakker word en die wind hoor, het hy onmiddellik sy sersant gebel en vir toestemming gevra om oortyd te werk. Hy het alreeds vir hom die bandopname van sy gesprek met Uil en die ander twee mans van die ROA gespeel. Die sersant was nie so bekommerd soos Clay was nie. Alex is immers deel van die taakspan wat die ROA moet ondersoek, en hy het die navorsing in sy eie tyd gedoen, nie as 'n polisievertegenwoordiger nie; daarom het hy nie toestemming nodig gehad nie. Daar is nie genoeg inligting om iemand in hegtenis te neem nie, maar indien 'n saak ooit teen die ekoterroriste gemaak word, kan die bandopname help.

Dit het geklink of die sersant dankbaar is dat hy bel. "Dit is alreeds besig hier, Brady. Kom wanneer jy kan."

Wind laat mense snaakse dinge doen. Hulle stig nie net brande nie, maar beroof banke en rand mense aan. Dit is asof die wind wat deur die bome waai en die windvlae mense nie net tot op die rand waai nie, maar daar oor. Behalwe vir veldbrande gaan daar vandag vir seker meer van die algemene probleme kop uitsteek.

Alex parkeer sy bakkie, trek sy uniform aan, en hy en Bo klim net ná nege die oggend in die polisiemotor. Net toe hy sy radio aansit, hoor hy die nuus. 'n Brand is gestig by 'n ontwikkeling, maar dit is nie Oak Canyon Estates nie. Dit is êrens net buite Pasadena. Wat wel saak maak, is dat ooggetuies gesien het hoe 'n verdagte die plek verlaat waar die brandstigting plaasgevind het.

Hy is halfpad na die landgoed toe hy 'n oproep om bystand kry. 'n Ouerige dame in Calabasas bel 911 al die hele oggend vir hulp met omtrent honderd soldate wat in haar agterplaas rondloop en nie wil weggaan nie. Hy en nog 'n polisieman is die naaste aan die vrou se huis; daarom word hulle uitgeroep.

Alex blaas sy asem gefrustreerd uit. Die vrou het al voorheen ingebel met soortgelyke visioene wat sy sien. Almal by die Lost Hills-stasie weet van haar en die bedrieglike bekommernisse wat haar laat bel vir hulp. Katte oral op haar huis se dak ... vreemde wesens wat in haar kombuis land ... plante wat die huis oorneem ... en nou dít. Hy is nog nooit na haar huis toe uitgeroep nie, maar van wat hy in Lost Hills se teekamer hoor, kan die polisiemanne nooit iets uitgerig kry nie, nooit die probleem oplos nie.

Hy skakel sy ligte aan en jaag met die deurpad af. Om vir so iets uitgeroep te word, is 'n mors van tyd wanneer die risiko om brandstigting so groot is. Hy ry so vinnig as wat hy kan en binne tien minute is hy by die huis waar die ou vrou bly. Een van Lost Hills se polisiemanne is reeds daar en wag in sy motor. Alex los die lugversorger vir Bo aan, maak die venster op 'n skrefie oop en

loop na die ander polisieman, Scheidel, 'n nuweling by die polisiestasie. "Jy weet hierdie ou vrou is die kluts kwyt." Scheidel haal sy skouers op. "Ons kan seker niks anders doen as om te kyk wat aangaan nie."

Alex voel hoe hy meer gespanne raak. Hy wil terug wees op die pad, na die verdagte soek, na Oak Canyon Estates toe ry voor die ROA weer tot aanval oorgaan. Hy gaan staan penregop en knik vir die polisieman om by hom aan te sluit. "Kom ons maak so."

Hulle is nog nie eers by die deur nie toe dit oopvlieg. Voor hulle staan 'n tingerige gryskopvrou, haar gesig vol vrees. Sy vou haar oorgrote baadjie om haar lyf en sy bewe. "Hulle is oral! Oral sê ek vir julle!" Sy tree vorentoe tot op die stoep en gryp Alex se arm. "Help my, jong man! Asseblief, help my!"

Alex voel hoe hy verstyf en wil terugtree. Niemand raak aan hom wanneer hy uitgeroep word nie, nooit nie. Maar dan keer hy homself. Die vrou gaan hom nie seermaak nie, en iets omtrent die angs in haar oë maak iets in hom wakker. Die gevoel is vreemd en onbekend, en hy kan nie anders as om te dink hoe sy pa die situasie sou hanteer het nie. "Mevrou, kalmeer." Alex sit sy hand op haar skouer. "Wat is die probleem?"

"Soldate! Hulle is oral!" Sy hyg nou na asem, op die punt om te hiperventileer. "Kry hulle hier uit!"

Sy kollega tree na vore. "Mevrou, wys vir ons waar hulle is."

"Hiernatoe." Sy bly langs Alex en hou aan hom vas, haar hele lyf bewe. Hulle loop deur 'n deurmekaar leefvertrek na 'n stoepdeur net langs die kombuis. Die vrou waai haar hand in die rigting van die agterplaas. Daar is 'n lappie lang gras en onkruid met 'n heining rondom waarvan die hout al verrot is. "Sien julle?" Sy probeer om agter Alex weg te kruip. "Die soldate is oral!"

"Mevrou, kom hier, nou!" Scheidel se stemtoon is kwaai en ongeduldig. Toe sy om Alex loer, wys hy vir haar dat sy moet naderkom. "Nou, Mevrou." Hy wys met sy vinger na die grond langs hom. "Hier langs my."

Die vrou lyk vreesbevange om Alex agter te laat, maar sy gee drie bewerige tree in Scheidel se rigting en haar wilde oë kyk na hom. Haar stem is 'n patetiese gekerm. "Jaag hulle weg." Sy gryp na Scheidel en knyp haar oë toe. "Asseblief, jaag hulle weg!"

Scheidel maak sy arm uit haar greep los. Hy wys na die agterplaas. "Mevrou, maak jou oë oop en kyk."

Dit neem haar 'n paar sekondes, maar uiteindelik maak sy haar oë op 'n skrefie oop. Haar oë beweeg van die een kant van die agterplaas na die ander, asof sy regtig iets sien. "Hulle wil nie weggaan nie!"

"Mevrou," Scheidel praat metodies met 'n diep stem, uit die hoogte asof met 'n kind of 'n hond. "Daar is nie soldate in jou agterplaas nie. Nie 'n enkele soldaat nie."

Sy bewe nou erger, en staar na dit wat haar kop haar in die agterplaas laat sien. "Ja ... honderd van hulle." Haar wilde oë kyk weer na Scheidel. "Ek het hulle getel."

Iets omtrent die toneel raak Alex op 'n manier wat nie sommer gebeur

wanneer hy uitgeroep word nie. Sy lyk gekwel en hulpeloos, soos 'n slagoffer ná 'n ramp. Soos die mense ná 11 September gelyk het. Skielik het hy 'n idee. Hy raak weer aan die vrou se skouer. “Ek sal hulle wegjaag, maar jy moet my help.”

Die eerste teken van hoop versag haar gesigsuitdrukking. Sy is steeds uitasem, vreesbevange oor wat dit ook al is wat sy sien.

“Kom saam met my uit tot op die stoep.”

Sy begin haar kop skud. “Maar hulle – ”

“Mevrou, as jy wil hê hulle moet weggaan, moet jy my help.”

Dit lyk of die vrou 'n hele leeftyd se moed bymekaarskraap. Alex loop eerste uit, en sy volg hom stadig. Toe sy op die stoep is en hulle die hele agterplaas in sig het, keer Alex haar. “Bly net hier.”

“Brady ... ” Scheidel hou sy hande in die lug asof hy sê Alex moenie die vrou se malheid verder voer nie.

Maar Alex wys vir die polisieman dat hy alles onder beheer het. Dan gee hy 'n paar vasberade treë tot op die gras en sit sy hande op sy heupe. “Oukei, manne, luister nou mooi! Ek wil julle almal in 'n reguit ry hê, nou!” Hy skree die bevel hard genoeg uit dat sy stem oor die hele agterplaas gehoor kan word. Terwyl hy skree, is dit weereens of hy sy pa se goedkeuring kan aanvoel: “Die eerste soldaat, kom staan hier!” Hy wys na links, waar 'n stukkende hekkie die enigste uitgang na buite is. “Die res van julle, val agter hom in. Almal!”

Uit die hoek van sy oog kan hy sien hoe die vrou haar hand oor haar mond sit, haar oë wyd gerek.

“Oukei,” Alex loop na die hekkie toe en maak dit versigtig oop sodat dit nie uit die skarniere val nie. Dan gaan hy terug na sy plek langs die vrou. “Wanneer ek die bevel gee, marsjeer julle by daardie hek uit en moenie terugkom nie. Ek sal elkeen van julle tel. Gereed ... ” Hy wys met sy vinger in die rigting van die oop hekkie. “Een ... twee ... drie. Komaan, beweeg, beweeg! Vier ... vyf ... ”

Die vrou se kop draai terwyl Alex tel en sy kyk hoe die denkbeeldige soldate haar erf verlaat. Alex hou aan tel, in die twintigs en dertigs, tot in die sewentigs en tagtigs. Toe hy amper klaar is, laat hy sy stemtoon selfs ernstiger klink. “Agt en negentig ... Nie een mag agterbly nie! Nege en negentig ... een honderd.” Hy gaan terug na die hekkie en skree: “Moenie terugkom nie of ek neem elke liewe een van julle in hegtenis!”

Hy loop na die vrou waar sy aan Scheidel vashou wat nou langs haar op die stoep staan. Sy huil openlik, die vrees en gebewe iets van die verlede. Toe Alex naderkom, reik sy uit na hom en raak aan hom, haar oë blink van bewondering. “Dankie, Meneer. Jy het my gered! Dankie!”

Hulle bring nog 'n paar minute daar deur om haar te verseker dat die soldate weg is, en loop dan na hulle motors voor die huis. Die hele situasie het nie langer as tien minute geduur nie, en Scheidel lag terwyl hulle uitloop. “Dit was briljant. Absoluut briljant.”

“Ek het gedink dit sal dalk help as iemand haar ernstig opneem.” Hy haal sy een skouer op. “Jy sal die verslag skryf, reg so?”

“Dit sal iets wees om te onthou. Honderd soldate van kant gemaak. Taak afgehandel.”

Voordat hy ry, sien Alex hoe die vrou op haar voorstoep staan en vir hulle waai. Weereens voel hy baie jammer vir haar. Hy waai terug en ry dan in die rigting van die deurpad. ’n Paar minute later hoor hy die berig: Nog ’n brand is besig om te woed by ’n ontwikkeling in Malibu. Die heuwels langs die gebied is reeds aan die brand, en brandweermanne uit die noorde, vanaf Santa Maria drie uur weg, is uitgeroep om te help. Hulle vermoed dit is weer brandstigting, en hierdie keer is daar geen ooggetuies nie. Die brande is ver van mekaar en dit versprei die brandweer oor ’n groot gebied. Met die wind word die gevare wat die dag inhou nou eers sigbaar.

Hy ry so vinnig hy kan sonder sirenes en ligte na die kronkelpad wat na Oak Canyon Estates lei. Sonder om te aarsel draai hy tot in die hoofstraat waarlangs al die huise in die nuutste fase gebou word. Hy draai regs en ry stadig tot aan die einde van die straat. Buite een van die huise staan ’n paar trokke geparkeer en twee mans wat netjies aangetrek is, met hardehoede op, praat met ’n konstruksiewerker. Alex knik vir hulle toe hy verbyry. Aan die einde van die straat draai hy om en ry na die ander kant. Daar staan net een motor buite die skouhuis geparkeer, en anderkant die motor staan nog trokke.

Alex veg teen die frustrasie toe hy met die steil pad afry. Die plek behoort ten minste ’n wag te hê. Iemand om besoekers se besonderhede na te gaan. Hy het by Clay gehoor die voorstel is al aan die ontwikkelaars genoem. Hulle is klaarblyklik in die proses om iemand by ’n sekuriteitsmaatskappy te huur. Alex kyk na die horison en sien twee grys gebiede wat die twee veldbrande aandui. Die wind skop ’n stofwolk voor hom op, en hy trek sy oë op skrefies om daardeur te sien.

Soms voel hy soos die ou vrou van vroeër, dat hy uitroep sodat iemand hom kan glo die brande kan hierdie jaar mense doodmaak. Dit kan brandweermanne doodmaak. Maar ná vandag kan hy dieselfde verligting as die vrou voel, want as gevolg van wat vandag gebeur het, kan niemand stry oor of die ROA brande in nuwe ontwikkelings stig nie. Hulle kan net oor een ding stry: wanneer dit met Oak Canyon Estates gaan gebeur.

NINETEEN

Jamie could hardly sleep, and when she woke Thursday morning only one thought filled her mind — this was the day she was going to meet Holly Brooks. She'd found the girl at the work number Alex's mother had passed along. Their initial conversation was brief since Jamie wanted the heart of their discussion to happen in person. She'd told the young woman only that the two of them shared a New York connection, and she'd like a chance to meet with her this week if possible.

The meeting was set for nine o'clock that morning when Holly had no other appointments. Jamie had been praying about it almost constantly.

As she drove the kids to school, she turned the radio to a news station for an update on the brush fires still burning along two separate mountain ranges. The Santa Ana winds had died down in the past twenty-four hours, and the smoky skies had cleared some, but the last Jamie heard, the fires were still burning.

The announcer was talking about baseball, with breaking news coming up on the hour. Jamie wasn't concerned with who was ahead in the World Series, so she turned the volume down and glanced at Sierra, sitting in the passenger seat of their Trail-blazer. "Ready for your math test?"

"Ugh!" Sierra made a face. She was in sixth grade, and much like when she was younger, she had an opinion about everything. "I wanted to talk to you about that." She angled herself so she could see Jamie better. "I love writing and reading and art and music and PE and —."

"And soccer!" CJ leaned his head as far forward as his car seat would allow. "You love soccer, Sissy."

"Right." Sierra flashed him a grin. "I love a lot of things, but I don't love math. So I was thinking, it doesn't seem right — once a person knows the basics ... adding, subtracting, division, multiplication — that she should have to take math in school unless she loves it." She grabbed a quick breath and kept on with her rapid-fire pace. "I mean, I don't want to be a math teacher, Mom. So math's a waste of time for me, and by the way, I had this talk with

Josh, and he feels the same. We're thinking of starting a petition, passing it around my school and then through his high school classes, and since we're not part of the public school system, maybe we can get rid of math except for those kids who love it." She blinked. "Isn't that a good idea?"

Jamie raised one eyebrow, a smile tugging at her lips. "Nice try." She reached over and patted Sierra's knee. "But I'm pretty sure no amount of signatures will convince the board at King Christian School to eliminate required math."

Sierra looked out the window, no doubt working up a retort.

"I have school today, right, Mommy?" CJ asked the question in a happy voice. With Sierra around, he'd learned to talk early and often, and his vocabulary was beyond that of most three-year-olds.

"Yes, honey. You have preschool two days a week, and today's one of those days."

"Goody!" He shouted his enthusiasm. "'Cause I love school, Mommy!"

"I love school too," Sierra jumped in. "Just not math."

"I like math 'cause we count with jelly beans." CJ bounced up and down. "Jelly bean math is yummy!"

"Yeah, I'd like that math too, buddy." Sierra grinned back at her brother. "Wait till you get to sixth grade." She held up empty hands. "No more jelly bean math."

"No more?" CJ sounded alarmed.

The commercial on the radio ended, and the news report came on. Jamie turned up the volume, and the kids quieted to listen. "Fires in the hills surrounding Los Angeles are seventy percent contained, a spokesperson for the fire department said this morning."

Jamie was grateful about the containment. She listened for the rest of the report.

"Officials have confirmed that the two separate blazes, which both began at the construction sites of custom hillside housing developments, were apparently intentionally set by the environmental terrorist group REA," the reporter's voice grew somber. "No arrests have been made, and a statement released by the sheriff's department today warned that with more winds in the forecast later this week, the danger for additional fires is high."

A shiver of concern ran down Jamie's arms. Clay and Joe both expected more

fires in the weeks to come, and with the tinder-dry hills, the department feared the situation could grow much worse.

“We’ve gotten off easy so far,” Clay told her last night. “Five unoccupied new homes and a few thousand acres of brush. The chance for a huge disaster still exists.”

The news was over, so Jamie pushed the button, turning off the radio.

“I don’t understand people setting fires on purpose.” Sierra pulled down the sun visor and looked at herself in the mirror. She pulled lip gloss from her backpack and applied it. “I mean,” she smacked her lips a few times, “how can it be good for the environment to have all that smoke clogging up the sky?”

“It doesn’t make sense.” Jamie kept her eyes on the road. “They’re a bunch of bad guys who like the attention. They can talk about the environment, but you’re right, honey. Destroying hillsides and homes ... that’s not the sign of people who care.”

“Someone should tell them about Jesus.” Sierra marked the statement with a tone of finality. “Then they could see how wrong they are.”

In the backseat, CJ launched into an off-key rendition of the song he’d learned last week in preschool. “Jesus loves me, this I know ... for the Bible tells me so!”

Jamie grinned. She loved this about Sierra and CJ, that they so fully and naturally embraced their faith. Clay had a wonderful way of incorporating talk about the Lord into their everyday conversation, so moments like these were completely natural. She pulled into the school parking lot and entered the drop-off line. King Christian School required a drive each morning, but it was well worth the effort. The school had a waiting list of kids hoping to get in, and its academic standards made it one of the top-ranked schools in the state — especially in math.

When it was their turn, Sierra leaned over and kissed Jamie’s cheek. “Bye, Mom. Love you.” She grabbed her backpack. “Have a good day! And pray about my math test.”

“I will. Love you too.” Jamie hugged her daughter and then watched her run off toward her peers. Three girls from her class hurried over to her, their faces lit up as the four of them headed toward the front doors.

“My turn!” CJ’s voice was pure glee. “You can see my turtle, Mommy! Okay? ‘Kay, you can see my turtle!”

“Sure, buddy. I can’t wait to see it.” Jamie eased out of the line and found a parking spot on the far end of the lot, adjacent to the separate building that housed the preschool. She unbuckled CJ, and he held her hand, skipping as they walked up the path to the right classroom.

Inside, half the kids were already there, and the teacher was helping them with some oversized crayons and construction paper. “Hi, CJ!” She waved. “We’re drawing pumpkins today!”

CJ smiled big. He tugged at Jamie’s hand. “Over here, Mommy ... my turtle’s over here!” He led her to the far wall where an extended family of paper turtles was tacked to a display area. He pointed to one with purple spots across its back. “That’s it, see! My turtle has polka dots!”

Jamie admired her son’s work, and after a few minutes she swung him up into her arms and kissed his forehead. “I love you, buddy. Have a good day.”

“Okay. Love you too.” He wrapped his arms around her neck and hugged her for a long time. “You’re my pretty Mommy.”

“Thanks, Ceej.” She set him down, and he ran off toward the others at the coloring table. Preschool lasted only three hours, and CJ loved every minute of it. But the fact that he was so well-adjusted was bittersweet. Just a year ago, he wouldn’t leave her side, and now ... well, he was growing up and needing her less.

She didn’t dwell on the fact as she left the classroom. She had to hurry if she was going to be on time to her appointment with Holly. The young woman had sounded pleasant but guarded during their phone call yesterday. Once they agreed on a meeting time, Jamie took down the address where Holly worked. She had searched online for it this morning on the way out the door and now, before she pulled out of the parking lot, she glanced at the piece of paper.

The directions took her back to the Ventura Freeway south toward Las Virgenes, and then up into the hills. *Strange*, Jamie thought. Most real estate offices would typically be on the valley floor, in the more populated areas. It took ten minutes to get to Las Virgenes, and another eight before she found the right road. She turned right and immediately saw the grand entrance to a housing development and an open gate just ahead of her. Jamie’s heart rate quickened as she slowed and read the sign.

Oak Canyon Estates? The development Alex was so concerned about? Jamie and Clay had talked about this place just yesterday, how Alex was still checking up on the REA’s headquarters and how he believed this development was next on the group’s hit list. So why had Holly given her the

address to Oak Canyon Estates, unless ... was this where she worked? Selling exclusively for this one development?

Jamie drove slowly up the hill, giving herself a chance to adjust to the shock. What were the odds that Alex's long-ago love would work at the very custom home site that he feared was in the greatest danger? At the top of the road, a paved street ran perpendicular to the hill, with gorgeous custom estates strategically placed on either side. Each of them was in various stages of construction, and in the middle was a finished home with flags lining the walkway. The address on the front of the house matched the one Holly had given her.

Jamie pulled into the nearest parking spot and checked her look in the mirror. *Please, God, let this be a step in the right direction. Let something come of this meeting that could help both Alex and Holly.* She remembered what Clay had said the night before.

"You're doing your best, and I understand your passion." He smoothed his thumb along the side of her face, looking into the soul of her intentions. "But it's a stretch, Jamie. Finding Alex's old girlfriend, looking her up without telling him."

"She doesn't have to talk to me. I just figure, what if ... what if she can help me understand Alex a little better?"

"It's a bit extreme, honey. Seriously." He kissed her, and his smile put her at ease. "I just hope you're right, that something good will come of it."

She knew Clay well enough to be sure — wherever he was, and whatever he was involved with at work this morning, he was praying for her. The fact gave her the strength to slip her purse over her shoulder, head up the walkway, and knock on the door of the model home. In a matter of seconds, a professional-looking blonde girl answered the door. Her smile stopped short of her eyes. "You must be Jamie Michaels?"

"Yes." Jamie fought back the doubts that rushed at her. She held out her hand. "Nice to meet you."

Holly led her into a formal living room across from what looked to be her office. They took the two chairs closest to each other. "Did you have any trouble finding it?"

"Not really," Jamie gave a light laugh. "I was looking for a real estate office. I didn't realize you worked for Oak Canyon Estates."

"I have for a few years now. This is the developer's third phase."

They talked about the houses for a few minutes, and then Holly slid to the edge of her seat, her eyes intent. "You said we shared a connection?"

"Yes." Jamie wondered if Holly could hear her thudding heart, the way she could hear it herself. She drew a steadying breath. "My husband works with Alex Brady. They're friends."

The reaction happened in her eyes, in the way the muscles beneath them tightened ever so subtly. "You ... know Alex?"

"Yes. My husband and I get together every month and barbecue with a few other couples. Alex hasn't missed a dinner."

"Couples?" The guard was up in Holly's eyes. "Alex is married?"

Jamie shook her head. "No, no. My husband invites him because ... well, because Alex needs that."

Holly sat back, her eyebrows knit together. "I'm not sure what to say."

The poor girl must've been beyond confused. Jamie didn't want to take up too much of her time — still, she had no choice but to start at the beginning. She told Holly how Alex intentionally kept himself away from people, how he existed in a world of eighty-hour work-weeks where his best friend was his service dog, Bo.

"I know about Alex's father, how he died." Jamie looked down at her hands. "My first husband was a firefighter. He died in the Twin Towers also."

"I'm sorry." Some of the confusion left the young woman's expression. She looked out the window for several seconds, her eyes distant. "It was awful, what Alex went through. He wouldn't let me in, wouldn't let anyone in." Her eyes found Jamie again. "I don't think Alex ever got over it."

"He hasn't, at least not from what we can see." Jamie continued, telling Holly about her time as a volunteer at St. Paul's Chapel. "I look at Alex, how he's going through life broken and hurting, dedicating every heartbeat to getting the bad guys, and my heart breaks for him." She shrugged. "I have to help. To me, Alex's name should be right up there next to the other names on a 9/11 victims' list. Because it seems like the terrorists took his life when they took his dad's." She leaned closer to Holly. "But there is a way for him to live again. I guess ... I don't know, somehow because of my experience, I feel like I can help." She paused. "But I need to understand Alex better, the way he was before."

Holly lowered her brow, and for a moment she seemed to struggle with what to say next. But even with no words her face told the story, how much she still

felt for the young deputy. Finally, her face darkened with a pain that bordered on anger. “You think I’m part of the solution for Alex?”

“I talked to his mom and ...” Jamie scrambled for the right words, “... she said the two of you were very close at one time. I figured maybe if — “

“I can only tell you that the person he used to be no longer exists.” Her voice was shaky, marked by sorrow. “Nothing I could say would help you now.”

Suddenly Jamie felt ridiculous coming here, making this attempt. She exhaled and moved to the edge of her seat. “I’m sorry, Holly. I can leave.”

Unshed tears shone in Holly’s eyes. She opened her mouth, but before she could find the words, she shook her head once and released a sound that was part cry, part exasperation. She stood and walked to the window, her back to Jamie. A long moment passed, and Holly made a quiet sniffing sound.

Jamie felt horrible. She stood and collected her purse. “I’ll go. I didn’t mean — “

“No.” Slowly, she faced Jamie again. “I’m glad you came. It’s just ... I can’t help you.”

“Holly ...” Jamie considered whether she should voice her boldest thoughts. She wouldn’t have this chance again. She took a quick breath and plunged ahead. “Sometimes ... when he’s with us, I have the feeling Alex is thinking about the past, about someone he left behind. Several people, maybe.”

“He isn’t thinking about me, Ms. Michaels. I can tell you that. It’s too late for Alex, for either of us. After he left for LA, I did everything I could.” She tossed her hands. “I’m here, right? I went to him and practically begged him to take me back. Of course, I wanted it to work.” A tear rolled down her cheek and dropped to the floor. Then the anger left her in a rush. “He doesn’t love me. He told me he didn’t want anything to do with me. That was years ago.”

If Jamie could’ve disappeared, if she could’ve undone the entire visit, she would have. What right did she have stirring up old heartache for this young woman? “I’m so sorry.” The heat in Jamie’s cheeks must’ve made her guilt obvious. She took a step closer to Holly. “My husband told me something once, something that maybe applies here.”

Fresh tears filled Holly’s eyes. She gave a light shrug.

“He told me the opposite of love isn’t hate. It’s indifference.” She put her hand on Holly’s shoulder and tried to see past her defenses. “And I can only tell you that Alex isn’t indifferent.”

She angled her head. “So in some small way his resistance to me,” she uttered a bitter laugh, “toward every attempt I’ve made ... is all because deep down he still loves me? That’s what you think?”

Jamie needed to leave before she made the situation worse. But she had to be honest too. “I think it’s possible, Holly.” She took a step back. “I came here looking for information, but maybe God wanted us to meet for a different reason. For you and Alex.”

Holly exhaled and dragged her hand through her hair, allowing her emotions to ease up. “Thank you, Jamie.” She dabbed at the tears caught in her lower eyelashes, and once more her smile lifted the corners of her lips. “I appreciate your effort, but it’s just too late.” She walked Jamie to the front door. “It was too late a long time ago.”

They said good-bye, and Jamie managed to make it to her car before her own sorrow welled up inside her. She slipped on her sunglasses, and by the time she was halfway down the dirt road, her tears came in earnest. So many hurting people, so many broken hearts. Somehow when God let her play a part in bringing healing to a person hurt by the terrorist attacks, the act validated Jake’s death, made her feel like some good had come from it.

But stories like Alex and Holly’s were proof that the losses of 9/11 were still playing out, that the cost would never fully be realized. Truly, she had believed if she could talk to Holly, she could figure out what had kept Alex so closed off, and that by finding that piece of his past, she could talk to Alex about what he’d left behind. Then, finally, he might let the walls down and realize the one thing Jamie felt sure God was trying to teach him — that he couldn’t trade his life for the task of eliminating evil in the world. Because if he gave his life before he truly found it, Alex wouldn’t be eliminating the waste the terrorists had created on 9/11.

He’d be adding to it, placing himself forever on the victims’ list of those who died on September 11.

Hoofstuk 19

Jamie kan byna nie slaap nie, en toe sy Donderdagoggend wakker word, is daar net een ding waaraan sy kan dink – vandag is die dag wat sy vir Holly Brooks gaan ontmoet. Sy het die vrou in die hande gekry deur die werksnommer te skakel wat sy by Alex se ma gekry het. Hulle eerste gesprek was kort, aangesien Jamie wil hê hulle moet van aangesig tot aangesig praat oor dit wat sy regtig wil bespreek. Sy het vir die vrou gesê dat hulle twee iets uit New York deel en dat sy haar graag hierdie week wil ontmoet indien moontlik.

Die afspraak is nege-uur die oggend wanneer Holly nie ander afsprake het nie. Jamie het gedurig daarvoor gebid.

Toe sy die kinders skool toe vat, draai sy die radio na 'n nuusstasie vir meer inligting oor die veldbrande wat steeds langs twee verskillende bergreekse brand. Die Santa Ana-winde het die afgelope vier en twintig uur gaan lê, en die rook in die lug is nou al byna weg. Maar die laaste wat Jamie gehoor het, is dat die vure steeds brand.

Die aankondiger praat oor bofbal en belangrike nuus in die volgende nuusbuletin. Jamie gee nie regtig om wie voorloop in die wêreldtoernooi nie; daarom draai sy die volume sagter en kyk na Sierra wat in die passasiersitplek sit. “Is jy reg vir jou wiskundetoets?”

“Ag!” Sierra trek haar gesig. Sy is in graad 6 en het, soos van kleins af, 'n opinie oor alles. “Ek wou nog met Mamma daarvoor gepraat het.” Sy draai haarself só dat sy vir Jamie beter kan sien. “Ek hou van skryf en lees en kuns en musiek en liggaamsopvoeding en – ”

“Sokker!” CJ lê vorentoe, so ver as wat sy motorstoeltjie dit toelaat. “Jy hou van sokker, Sussie.”

“Ja.” Sierra glimlag vir hom. “Ek hou van baie dinge, maar ek hou nie van wiskunde nie. So ek het daarvoor gedink. Dit klink mos nie reg dat wanneer jy die basiese dinge weet – optel, aftrek, maal en deel – jy wiskunde moet neem as jy nie daarvan hou nie.” Sy haal vinnig asem en gaan dan voort met haar vinnige pas. “Ek bedoel, ek wil nie 'n wiskunde-onderwyser word nie, Ma. So wiskunde is vir my 'n mors van tyd, en in elk geval, ek het met Josh gepraat en hy voel dieselfde. Ons dink daaraan om 'n petisie te begin en by die skool om te stuur. En aangesien ons nie deel van die openbare skole is nie, kan ons dalk van wiskunde ontslae raak, behalwe vir die kinders wat daarvan hou.” Sy knip haar oë. “Is dit nie 'n goeie idee nie?”

Jamie lig haar een wenkbrou en glimlag. “Dit was 'n goeie probeerslag.” Sy leun oor na Sierra en vryf haar knie. “Maar ek is seker dat geen handtekeninge die bestuur by King Christian School sal oortuig om van wiskunde, wat verpligtend is, ontslae te raak nie.”

Sierra kyk by die venster uit, sonder twyfel besig om 'n vinnige, gevatte antwoord uit te dink.

“Ek gaan vandag skool toe, nè, Mamma?” vra CJ. Hy klink bly. Met Sierra in die omtrek het hy vinnig leer praat, en sy woordeskat is beter as die meeste driejariges s'n.

“Ja, my skat. Jy gaan twee dae 'n week kleuterskool toe en vandag is een van daardie dae.”

“Lekker!” skree hy entoesiasies uit. “Want ek hou van skool, Mamma!”

“Ek hou ook van skool,” sê Sierra vinnig. “Net nie van wiskunde nie.”

“Ek hou van wiskunde, want ons tel met lekkertjies.” CJ beweeg op en af.

“Lekkertjie-wiskunde is lekker!”

“Ja, ek sal ook van daardie wiskunde hou.” Sierra glimlag vir haar klein boetie. “Wag totdat jy in graad 6 kom.” Sy hou haar leë handpalms in die lug.

“Dan is daar nie meer iets soos lekkertjie-wiskunde nie.”

“Rêrig?” CJ klink bekommerd.

Die advertensie oor die radio is verby en die nuusberig begin. Jamie maak die radio harder en die kinders raak stil om te luister. “’n Woordvoerder van die brandweer het vanoggend gesê sowat sewentig persent van die brande in die heuwels om Los Angeles is onder beheer.”

Jamie is dankbaar dat die brande onder beheer is. Sy luister na die res van die berig.

“Amptenare het bevestig dat die twee aparte veldbrande, wat albei begin het by die konstruksie-gebiede van ontwikkelings, klaarblyklik opsetlik gestig is deur die ROA, ’n omgewingsterroriste groep,” die verslaggewer se stem klink somber. “Niemand is nog in hegtenis geneem nie, en ’n verslag wat vandag deur die polisie uitgereik is, waarsku dat nog winde wat vir later die week voorspel word die gevaar van nog brande verhoog.”

Jamie ril van bekommernis. Clay en Joe verwag albei meer brande in die komende week, en met die kurkdroë heuwels is die polisie bang dat die situasie kan vererger.

“Ons het tot dusver lig daarvan afgekom,” het Clay gisteraand gesê. “Vyf nuwe huise wat onbewoon was en ’n paar honderd hektaar veld. Daar is steeds kans vir ’n groot ramp.”

Die nuus is verby en Jamie skakel die radio af.

“Ek verstaan nie hoe mense doelbewus kan brande stig nie,” Sierra trek die sonskerm pie af en kyk na haarself in die spieëltjie. Sy haal lipglans uit haar rugsak en smeer dit aan. “Ek bedoel,” sy vryf haar lippe ’n paar keer oor mekaar, “hoe kan dit goed wees vir die omgewing as daar rook in die lug opstyg?”

“Dit maak nie sin nie.” Jamie kyk voor haar in die pad. “Hulle is ’n klomp skurke wat van die aandag hou. Hulle kan oor die omgewing praat, maar jy is reg, my skat. Om heuwels en huise te vernietig ... dis nie ’n teken van mense wat omgee nie.”

“Iemand moet vir hulle van Jesus vertel.” Sierra sê die woorde asof dit vanselfsprekend is. “Dan kan hulle sien hoe verkeerd hulle is.”

Op die agterste sitplek begin CJ om ’n vals weergawe van die liedjie te sing wat hy verlede week by die kleuterskool geleer het. “Jesus loves me, this I know ... for the Bible tells me so!”

Jamie glimlag. Sy is mal daaroor dat Sierra en CJ hulle geloof ten volle en so natuurlik aanneem. Clay het die wonderlike gewoonte om in hulle elkedagse gesprekke oor die Here te praat; daarom is oomblikke soos hierdie heeltemal natuurlik. Sy ry by die skool se parkeerarea in en gaan stop waar die kinders moet afklim. Hulle moet elke oggend ry om die kinders by King Christian School af te laai, maar dit is die moeite werd. Die skool het ’n waglys van kinders wat graag hierheen wil kom, en die skool se akademiese standaard maak dit een van die beste skole in die staat – veral wat hulle wiskunde betref. Toe die kinders moet uitklim, leun Sierra na haar ma toe en soen Jamie op die

wang. “Tatta, Mamma. Ek is lief vir Mamma.” Sy gryp haar rugsak. “Geniet Mamma se dag! En bid oor my wiskundetoets!”

“Ek sal. Ek is lief vir jou ook.” Jamie gee haar dogter ’n drukkie en kyk hoe sy na haar maats toe hardloop. Drie meisies in haar klas hardloop haar tegemoet en hulle gesigte verhelder toe die vier van hulle na die ingang toe loop.

“My beurt!” CJ se stem is die ene blydschap. “Mamma kan my skilpad kom kyk! Oukei? Mamma kan my skilpad kom kyk!”

“Goed, my seun. Ek kan nie wag om hom te sien nie.” Jamie trek weg en kry parkering aan die verste punt van die parkeerarea, langs die gebou wat apart staan waar die kleuterskool is. Sy maak CJ los en hy hou haar hand vas en huppel terwyl hulle na sy klaskamer toe loop.

Die helfte van die kinders is reeds daar en die juffrou gee vir hulle groot vetkryte en papier. “Hallo, CJ!” Sy waai vir hom. “Ons gaan vandag pampoene teken!”

CJ glimlag breed. Hy trek aan Jamie se arm. “Hierso, Mamma ... my skilpad is hier!” Hy lei haar na die agterste muur waar ’n uitgebreide familie papierskilpaaie teen die muur opgeplak is. Hy wys na een met pers kolle op sy rug. “Daar is hy, sien! My skilpad het kolletjies!”

Jamie bewonder haar seun se werk en na ’n paar minute tel sy hom op en gee hom ’n soen op sy voorkop. “Ek is lief vir jou, my seun. Hoop jy het ’n lekker dag.”

“Oukei. Ek is lief vir Mamma ook.” Hy vou sy arms om haar nek en druk haar vir ’n lang ruk. “Jy is my mooi Mamma.”

“Dankie, CJ.” Sy sit hom neer en hy hardloop na die ander kinders by die inkleurtafel. Die kleuterskool is net vir drie uur oop, en CJ geniet elke oomblik. Maar Jamie vind dit moeilik dat hy so goed aangepas het. Net ’n jaar terug sou hy nêrens sonder haar wou gaan nie en nou ... wel, hy word groot en het haar minder nodig.

Sy dink nie verder daaroor toe sy die klaskamer verlaat nie. Sy sal moet gou maak as sy betyds wil wees vir haar afspraak met Holly. Die jong vrou het vriendelik maar op haar hoede geklink toe sy gister met haar oor die telefoon gepraat het. Nadat hulle ’n tyd afgespreek het, het Jamie die adres neergeskryf waar Holly werk. Sy het net voor sy gery het op die internet na die adres gesoek en nou, voordat sy die parkeerarea verlaat, kyk sy gou na die stukkie papier.

Die rigtingaanwysings neem haar terug na die Ventura-deurpad in ’n suidelike rigting na Las Virgenes, en dan op met die heuwels. *Dis vreemd*, dink Jamie. Die meeste eiendomsagentskappe is in die vallei, in die besiger dele. Dit neem haar tien minute om by Las Virgenes te kom, en nog agt minute voor sy op die regte pad is. Sy draai regs en onmiddellik sien sy die groot ingang na ’n ontwikkeling, en ’n oop hek reg voor haar. Jamie se hart klop vinniger toe sy stadiger ry om die naambord te lees.

Oak Canyon Estates? Die ontwikkeling waaroor Alex so bekommerd is?

Jamie en Clay het net gister oor hierdie plek gepraat, hoe Alex steeds die ROA se hoofkwartiere dophou en hoe hy glo hierdie ontwikkeling is volgende op die groep se lys. Waarom het Holly vir haar Oak Canyon Estates se adres gegee, tensy ... is dit waar sy werk? Verkoop sy eksklusief vir hierdie een ontwikkeling?

Jamie ry stadig teen die heuwel uit om vir haarself genoeg tyd te gee om die skok te verwerk. Wat is die kans dat Alex se langverlore liefde by die ontwikkeling werk wat hy vrees in groot gevaar is? Bo in die pad loop daar 'n geplaveide straat loodreg met die heuwel, met pragtige huise wat strategies geplaas is aan albei kante. Die huise is almal in verskeie fases van konstruksie, en in die middel is 'n huis wat klaar is met vlaggies al langs die tuinpaadjie. Die nommer voor teen die huis is dieselfde as die een wat Holly vir haar gegee het.

Jamie parkeer in die naaste parkeerplek en kyk na haarself in die truspieëltjie. *Asseblief, Here, laat hierdie 'n tree in die regte rigting wees. Mag daar iets van hierdie ontmoeting kom wat vir Alex en Holly kan help.* Sy onthou wat Clay gisteraand gesê het.

“Jy doen jou bes, en ek verstaan jou passie.” Hy het sy duim oor haar wang gevryf, en tot diep binne-in haar voornemens gekyk. “Maar hierdie is ver gevat, Jamie. Om Alex se vorige meisie op te soek en haar te ontmoet sonder om hom daarvan te sê.”

“Sy hoef nie met my te praat nie. Ek reken net, wat as ... wat as sy my kan help om Alex beter te verstaan?”

“Dit is 'n bietjie vergesog, my skat. Regtig.” Hy het haar gesoen en sy glimlag het haar op haar gemak gestel. “Ek hoop net jy is reg, dat iets goeds hieruit sal kom.”

Sy ken Clay goed genoeg om te weet – waar ook al hy is, waarmee hy ook al vanoggend besig is, hy bid vir haar. Dit gee haar die krag om haar handsak oor haar skouer te gooi, met die tuinpaadjie op te loop en aan die deur van die skouhuis te klop. Binne 'n paar sekondes maak 'n blondekopvrou wat baie professioneel lyk die voordeur oop. Haar gesig straal van vriendelikheid. “Jy moet Jamie Michaels wees?”

“Ja.” Jamie veg teen die twyfeling wat oor haar spoel. Sy hou haar hand uit. “Aangename kennis.”

Holly lei haar na 'n formele leefvertrek oorkant 'n vertrek wat soos haar kantoor lyk. Hulle gaan sit op die stoele die naaste aan mekaar. “Het jy gesukkel om die plek te kry?”

“Nie regtig nie,” Jamie giggel. “Ek het eintlik na 'n eiendomsagentskap gesoek. Ek het nie besef jy werk vir Oak Canyon Estates nie.”

“Ja, vir 'n paar jaar al. Dit is die ontwikkelaar se derde fase.”

Hulle praat vir 'n paar minute oor die huise en dan skuif Holly tot op die voorpunt van die stoel, haar oë vraend. “Jy het gesê ons is op 'n manier aan mekaar verbind?”

“Ja.” Jamie wonder of Holly kan hoor hoe haar hart klop, soos sy dit kan hoor.

Sy asem in om goed bymekaar te skraap. “My man werk saam met Alex Brady. Hulle is vriende.”

Die reaksie vind in haar oë plaas, in die manier hoe die spiertjies onder haar oë subtiel saamtrek. “Jy ... jy ken vir Alex Brady?”

“Ja. Ek en my man braai een keer ’n maand saam met ’n paar ander paartjies. Alex was nog elke keer daar.”

“Paartjies?” Holly se oë lyk of sy op die aanval is. “Is Alex getroud?”

Jamie skud haar kop. “Nee, nee. My man nooi hom, want ... wel, Alex het dit nodig.”

Holly sit terug en frons. “Ek dink nie ek weet wat om te sê nie.”

Die arme vrou moet heeltemal verward wees. Jamie wil nie haar tyd mors nie, tog het sy geen ander keuse as om by die begin te begin nie. Sy vertel vir Holly hoe Alex hom bewustelik van mense weerhou, hoe hy in ’n wêreld leef waar hy tagtig uur per week werk en sy beste vriend sy hond, Bo, is.

“Ek weet van Alex se pa, hoe hy oorlede is.” Jamie kyk af na haar hande. “My eerste man was ’n brandweerman. Hy is ook dood in die Twin Towers.”

“Ek is jammer.” Die jong vrou lyk nie meer so verward nie. Sy kyk vir ’n paar sekondes by die venster uit, haar oë staar die verte in. “Wat Alex deurgemaak het, was aaklig. Hy het my nie naby hom toegelaat nie, niemand nie.” Sy kyk weer na Jamie. “Ek dink Alex het dit nog nooit verwerk nie.”

“Hy het nie, ten minste nie wat ons kan agterkom nie.” Jamie gaan voort en vertel vir Holly van haar vrywilligerswerk by St. Paul’s Chapel. “Ek kyk na Alex, hoe hy gebreek en seer deur die lewe gaan, hoe hy alles wat hy het daaraan wy om misdadigers te vang, en ek kry hom só jammer.” Sy haal haar skouers op. “Ek moet hom help. Volgens my moet Alex se naam langs die name van ander slagoffers van 11 September wees. Want dit lyk of die terroriste sy lewe geneem het toe hulle sy pa s’n geneem het.” Sy leun nader aan Holly. “Maar daar is vir hom ’n manier om weer te leef. Ek veronderstel ... Ek weet nie, as gevolg van my ondervinding voel dit of ek kan help.” Sy bly ’n oomblik stil. “Maar ek moet Alex beter verstaan, hoe hy voorheen was.”

Holly frons effens en vir ’n oomblik lyk dit of sy nie weet wat om volgende te sê nie. Maar selfs sonder woorde vertel haar gesig die storie, hoeveel sy vir die jong polisieman omgee. Uiteindelik kan ’n mens pyn op haar gesig sien, pyn wat amper soos woede lyk. “Jy dink ek kan help om die situasie met Alex op te los?”

“Ek het met sy ma gepraat ... ” Jamie soek na die regte woorde. “Sy het gesê julle twee was eens op ’n tyd baie na aan mekaar. Ek het gereken dat as – ”

“Al wat ek vir jou kan sê, is dat die persoon wat hy was nie meer bestaan nie.” Haar stem bewee en klink hartseer. “Niks wat ek kan sê, sal jou nou kan help nie.”

Skielik voel Jamie simpel omdat sy hierheen gekom het, iets probeer doen het. Sy asem uit en skuif tot voor op haar stoel. “Ek is jammer, Holly. Ek sal gaan.”

Trane wat lankal gestort moes gewees het, blink in Holly se oë. Sy maak haar mond oop, maar voordat sy die woorde kan kry, skud sy haar kop een keer en maak 'n geluid wat deels 'n uitroep en deels ergernis is. Sy staan op en loop na die venster met haar rug na Jamie. Daar gaan 'n hele rukkie verby en Holly snuif sag.

Jamie voel baie sleg. Sy staan op en tel haar handsak op. "Ek sal nou gaan. Ek het nie bedoel –"

"Nee." Sy draai stadig om. "Ek is bly jy het gekom. Dit is net ... Ek kan jou nie help nie."

"Holly ... " Jamie wonder of sy die gesprek moet voortsit. Sy gaan nie weer hierdie geleentheid kry nie. Sy haal vinnig asem en sê: "Soms ... wanneer hy by ons is, kry ek die gevoel dat Alex aan die verlede dink, oor iemand wat hy agtergelaat het. Baie mense, miskien."

"Hy dink nie aan my nie, mevrou Michaels. Dit kan ek jou belowe. Dit is te laat vir Alex, vir al twee van ons. Nadat hy Los Angeles toe gekom het, het ek alles gedoen wat ek kon." Sy gooi haar hande in die lug op. "Ek is hier, nie waar nie? Ek het na hom toe gegaan en hom omtrent gesmeek om my terug te vat. Natuurlik wou ek hê dit moet werk." 'n Traan rol oor haar wang. Dan is die woede iets van die verlede. "Hy is nie lief vir my nie. Hy het vir my gesê hy wil niks met my te doen hê nie. Dit was jare gelede."

As Jamie kon verdwyn, as sy die hele kuiertjie kon laat verdwyn, sou sy. Sy het mos nie die reg om ou wonde vir hierdie jong vrou oop te krap nie? "Ek is jammer." Jamie se rooi wange verklap seker haar skuldgevoel. Sy tree nader aan Holly. "My man het een keer vir my iets gesê, iets wat dalk nou van toepassing kan wees."

Meer trane vul Holly se oë. Sy haal haar skouers effens op.

"Hy het vir my gesê die teenoorgestelde van liefde is nie haat nie. Dit is onverskilligheid." Sy sit haar hand op Holly se skouer en probeer om tot binne-in haar siel te sien. "En ek kan vir jou sê dat Alex nie onverskillig is nie."

Sy draai haar kop skuins. "So op die een of ander manier is sy weerstand teenoor my," sy lag bitter, "teenoor elke poging wat ek aangewend het ... omdat hy diep binne-in steeds lief is vir my? Is dit wat jy dink?"

Jamie moet gaan voordat sy die situasie vererger. Maar sy moet ook eerlik wees. "Ek dink dit is moontlik, Holly." Sy tree terug. "Ek het hierheen gekom vir inligting, maar miskien wou God hê ons moet vir 'n ander rede ook ontmoet. Vir jou en Alex."

Holly asem uit en trek haar hand deur haar hare sodat sy haar emosies onder beheer kan bring. "Dankie, Jamie." Sy vee oor die trane wat vasgevang is in haar wimpers, en glimlag weer. "Ek waardeer jou moeite, maar dit is te laat." Sy loop saam met Jamie voordeur toe. "Dit is al lankal te laat."

Hulle groet mekaar en Jamie slaag daarin om by haar motor uit te kom voordat die hartseer in haar opwel. Sy sit haar sonbril op, en teen die tyd dat sy halfpad met die grondpad af is, huil sy met mening. So baie mense wat seer

het, so baie harte wat gebreek is. Op die een of ander manier, wanneer God haar gebruik om 'n persoon te genees wat seergemaak is deur die terroriste-aanvalle, bekragtig die daad altyd Jake se dood, laat dit haar voel of iets goeds daaruit na vore kom.

Maar stories soos dié van Alex en Holly is 'n bewys dat die verlies van 11 September lank nie verby is nie, dat die invloed daarvan nooit werklik besef sal word nie. Sy het werklik gedink dat as sy met Holly praat, sy kan uitvind wat Alex so geslote hou, en dat sy deur daardie stukkies van sy verlede te vind met hom kan praat oor wat hy agtergelaat het. Dat hy dan uiteindelik die mure om hom sal afbreek en die een ding besef wat Jamie seker is God hom wil leer – dat hy nie sy lewe daarvoor kan verruil om die boosheid in die wêreld uit te wis nie. Want as hy sy lewe gee voordat hy dit werklik gevind het, sal Alex nie die gemors kan uitwis wat die terroriste op 11 September veroorsaak het nie.

Hy sal net daartoe bydra deur sy naam vir altyd op die lys van slagoffers te plaas wat op 11 September dood is.

TWENTY

The call for backup came just after ten o'clock that night, as Alex was about to circle back west on the Ventura Freeway and park at the base of the road leading up to the Oak Canyon Estates. The Santa Ana winds were back now, and Alex had no doubt the REA would hit that area if Owl and the others had a chance.

"Get ready, Bo," he reached back and patted his dog. "You're helping on this one."

Bo barked a single time, alert and anxious. He could sense the change in the car's speed, the hint of adrenaline already coursing through Alex.

"I know, buddy ... we're almost there." Alex exited at Thousand Oaks Boulevard and forced himself to think about the call at hand. A routine traffic stop by a deputy named Waller, a veteran with the force. The stop took place at the last light at the top of the hill and netted an open container and a drunk guy with an attitude. Waller had told the guy to stay put while he returned to his squad car. An arrest was needed, but Waller needed backup before he would take on the guy by himself.

Alex pressed his foot on the gas and flipped on his siren. The wind whipped through the trees overhead, and a chill ran down his spine. The REA was probably plotting their next fire right now, the same way the terrorists had plotted their horrific deeds in the days before 9/11. He glanced out the passenger window and saw a haze of light-colored smoke in the far distance. It had been a week since the fires at the other developments, and still no arrests had been made. Detectives had questioned Owl and several others, but they'd denied involvement and there wasn't enough evidence to bring anyone in. It wasn't like they carried cards declaring their membership to the REA.

Frustration welled up inside Alex. The guys had to be caught in the act, there was no other way. And he was convinced Oak Canyon Estates was still on the REA's hit list, probably up next. Alex would've liked nothing more than to camp out on the dirt road and catch the cowards in the act.

Waller came over the radio. "Suspect is acting shady, a little too full of

motion. He might run.”

Not on my shift, Alex thought. He patted Bo again. “He runs and he’s yours, Bo. All yours.”

This time Bo responded with two barks. He paced across the backseat, ready for whatever was asked of him. Alex reached back and patted Bo, and as he did he caught a glimpse of Bo in the rearview mirror, at his earnest, brave eyes. Such a good dog, such a dedicated partner. Since Alex took the job, that was all he ever wanted — to be a deputy with the same heart and loyalty, the same single-mindedness as Bo, ready at any minute to lay his life down if it meant getting one more thug off the streets of Los Angeles.

Up ahead Alex could see Waller’s car, and ahead of it, the dark sedan where the suspect was still sitting. Just as Alex turned off his siren and pulled up behind the squad car, the suspect flung his door open, sprang from his vehicle, and sprinted across the street into a thicket of brush and trees.

Waller’s urgent call came over the radio. “Suspect is fleeing on foot, repeat, suspect is fleeing on foot.”

Alex barely had time to radio in that he’d arrived and was in pursuit before he leashed Bo, drew his gun, and ran to Waller, who was already out of his car, his gun in his hand. “We’ll lead.” He started toward the trees. “Cover me.”

With even a minute lead, the situation was suddenly dangerous. The guy could be anywhere in the wooded area, hiding behind a tree near the spot where he entered or headed for the other side of the thicket. Alex gave Bo plenty of lead, and immediately the dog picked up the suspect’s trail. Bo stopped and barked, his head locked in position, waiting for the command.

“Get ‘em, boy!” Alex shouted. “Go get ‘em!”

Bo strained against the leash, running as fast as he could with Alex holding the end. Alex tore into the wooded area behind his dog, the ground uneven beneath his feet. Behind him, Waller clicked on a flashlight which helped a little, but the speed of the chase was still such that they were running blind into the darkness. If not for Bo leading them, they could never have taken the suspect’s trail at this pace.

All at once, there was a blur of motion in a clearing ahead and to the left, but as the suspect jumped out and raised his gun to fire at Alex and the other deputy, Bo ran straight for him. The suspect fired once and Alex felt the bullet blow past him. Before the man could fire a second bullet at the deputies, he seemed to notice the dog running straight at him. He turned his gun on Bo and started to pull the trigger.

“Get him, Bo!” Alex shouted, his sides heaving. *Not Bo. Don’t let him get Bo*

...

The suspect tried to finish the shot, but it was too late. Bo leaped at him, leveling the man backward with such a force he flew into a mass of scrub brush. A groan came from him as he hit the brittle bushes, and at the same time he fired his gun again. This time the bullet sailed harmlessly to the side, and before he could raise his weapon another time, Bo quickly identified the suspect’s gun-wielding hand and bit hard into that arm, pinning him down and containing him.

Bo was in a frenzy, biting the man’s arm and growling at him.

“Hey!” The suspect screamed in pain. “Call him off! Help me! Call off the dog!”

“Throw your gun where we can see it,” Alex belted out the command.

The man hesitated, and Bo clearly understood that the fight wasn’t over yet. He deepened his growl and bit harder into the man’s arm, shaking it like he would a chew toy. The suspect screamed again. “Okay! Here!” He threw his gun onto the ground near where the deputies were standing. “Call him off!”

Alex was still breathing hard. Waller crept up alongside him, his flashlight aimed at the gun on the ground. He picked it up, slid it into his back pocket, and retreated to the spot next to Alex.

“Call him off!” The man’s cry was shrill now, desperate.

Next to him, Waller was calling in details of the detainment, instructing backup where to find them.

Alex took a few steps closer to the suspect. “Bo ... release.”

Additional deputies were running up behind them, and in the next few minutes the suspect was bandaged, cuffed, and led away. Alex patted Bo’s side as he walked next to him back to the street. “Good boy, Bo ... good job.” It was one more time when Bo had saved his life. If the suspect hadn’t been distracted by the sight of a German shepherd tearing through the brush and coming for him, he would’ve fired a round of shots before Alex and Waller had a chance to respond.

The wind bent and bowed the trees around them, and as they entered the open street again, Alex thought he could smell smoke. Either the old fires had shifted, sparked to life again by the wind, or something new was burning. He took Bo to the squad car, pulled out the gallon water bottle, and poured some in the dog’s blue bowl. Bo lapped it up, stopping just once to cast grateful

eyes on Alex.

“Atta boy, Bo ... good dog.” Alex crouched down beside him and rubbed the soft spot by his ear — Bo’s favorite.

Waller came up to them. He was still breathing hard, still coming down off the adrenaline rush. He leaned on Alex’s car. “First bullet nearly got you.”

“Second one would’ve.” Alex kept his eyes on his dog. “Bo knew where he was before the guy stepped out.”

He held out his hand and shook Alex’s. “Great backup, Brady.” He left them alone to go work on the reports.

Alex bent back down and rubbed Bo’s ear. “You hungry, boy?” He kept a bag of food in the car for times like this — midway through a shift with a couple of active calls behind them. He scooped a cup of kibble into a second blue bowl and gave it to the dog. Again, Bo lifted grateful eyes his direction. The dog would’ve died for him, no question about it.

Alex added his comments to the report, dumped out the rest of Bo’s water, and opened the door for the dog. “Come on, Bo ... back to headquarters.” He stacked the two bowls on the floorboard and climbed into the driver’s seat. He needed to file his own report before he could go out on patrol again.

He could feel the wind hard against his car as he pulled onto the freeway. He made a quick call to the Lost Hills station. “You have someone checking out the Oak Canyon Estates?” He didn’t want to pry, but he couldn’t stand the thought of driving the opposite direction from the place where the next ecoterrorist attack could take place.

“Got it. The developer called a few hours ago and asked for extra support.”

“Good. Arsonists love nights like this.” Alex pictured Owl and the other two clowns trying to make it up the hill and coming face-to-face with a sheriff’s deputy.

Halfway to the station, grim thoughts hit him. What if he hadn’t had Bo with him tonight? What if the gunman had killed him with that second shot? Alex settled back into his seat. Like a tidal wave, a wall of futility washed over him. If he’d been killed in a thicket by a drunk gunman, then what would his life have mattered? Sure, he’d gotten a number of bad guys, but for every arrest, there were ten that didn’t take place, another batch of crooks growing up and taking part in the street war all around them.

He thought about Jamie Bryan, the fact that she’d found a journal entry written by his father, an entry that Alex hadn’t let her share with him. In some

ways, it might've served as his father's last words for him, but he'd shut them out, refused them. If he had died up there on the brush-covered hill, he never would've had the chance to hear them.

And what about Holly? He'd refused her too, but he still wondered. Was she in New York? Had she fallen in love and married, like he suspected? Had she learned to forgive him, to forget him the way he wanted her to? If the gunman's bullet had hit its mark, Alex would never have those answers, either.

The futility filled him and surrounded him, suffocating him and drawing him into a whirlpool of waste. Wasted time and years and days and effort. He could get a dozen bad guys every day, but would the problem of evil in the city be reduced any, really? He straightened and summoned in himself the courage and determination, the sheer will and sense of justice that lived where his heart had once resided. He might never rid the city of everything bad and dangerous, but with every one, with every chase and every arrest, one more family was spared, one more high school senior didn't have to come home to find his life torn apart.

Gradually, the despair dissipated and he could breathe again. The wind howled overhead as he reached headquarters and went inside with Bo. In the break room, he found Clay and Joe huddled over cups of coffee, their faces lined with concern.

Clay spotted him first. He frowned and motioned for Alex to join them. "We heard about your chase. Good work, Brady."

"Thank you." Alex looked from Clay to Joe and back again. "What's up?"

"A deputy went down." Joe's voice was thick with discouragement. "East LA. Responded to a disturbing the peace and took a bullet in the neck. Suspect was a guy you arrested a few months ago."

Alex's stomach dropped, and he clenched his fists. Gut-wrenching pain took hold of him, the same pain he'd felt when he walked into the house that Tuesday morning and saw his mother watching the television screen, saw the Twin Towers in a heap of rubble with his father somewhere inside them. A pain that consumed him. Alex put his foot on the seat of the nearest chair, dug his elbow into his knee, and hung his head.

"He's been in surgery the last four hours. Critical condition." Clay rarely sounded beaten, but this was one of those times. "If he lives, they don't think he'll walk again. The bullet hit his spine."

A stifled moan built in Alex's chest and came out as an angry cry. He

slammed his fist on the table and then stormed to the corner where the coffee was set up. He felt Bo beside him, heard the dog whimper softly. Alex exhaled hard through his nose and leaned down enough to touch his fingers to Bo's head. "It's okay, Bo. Down, boy." His dog kept his eyes locked on Alex as he took a few tentative steps back and then settled down on the cool floor. Alex felt weary, physically beaten. He looked over his shoulder. "The suspect?"

Clay was on his feet coming toward him. "Shot and killed at the scene. Two others were arrested."

The bad guy wouldn't kill again, but still he represented another death, more heartache on the streets. Somewhere tonight the criminal's mother and father, his siblings, maybe even his children would be changed forever because he was gone. He'd arrested the guy a few months ago, but the effort wasn't enough. The guy hadn't changed, hadn't gone home and become an upstanding citizen. So how had Alex's arrest mattered at all? The evil on the streets was still winning if a deputy could make a routine house call and be shot in the process. He hung his head again and gripped the edge of the table where the coffeemaker sat.

"Alex ..." Clay put an arm around his shoulders. "There was nothing you could've done. The courts let him back out."

"I know." Alex squeezed the words through a locked jaw. He lifted his head and motioned to the space around him. "But if all this, the department and the deputies and the dogs and the SWAT teams, can't stop that from happening, can't even make a dent in the war out there, then what's it all for?"

Clay's eyes grew hard. "Come on, Brady. We need to talk."

Alex was about to argue, but he wanted to hear Clay out, hear what reasoning his captain could possibly have to justify their work at an hour like this. He gave Bo the command to stay, and he followed Clay outside to a small fenced courtyard with a few empty picnic tables. Clay sat on the edge of the closest one and put his feet on the bench. "This talk's a long time coming." Curiosity disarmed Alex's pain and hopelessness for a moment. He blinked and waited.

"You have it all wrong about the evil around us." Clay's voice was intense, his tone louder than usual. "Now, I know you used to have faith in Christ. You've told me yourself, so what I'm about to say I want you to hear with the ears you used to have. The ears you had before 9/11." The wind swirled around them, pushing through Alex's hair and stinging his eyes. He wanted to run back inside, get his dog, and hit the road. But he squinted against the wind and listened, half hoping Clay would say something that might make sense of everything he was feeling.

“The other day I found a Bible verse that might as well have been written for you.” Clay leaned closer, his forearms on his knees. He must’ve read the reluctance in Alex’s eyes because he raised his brow. “Yes, a Bible verse. It’s still the best wisdom around, whatever you think.”

Alex folded his arms and there was that feeling again, the confusing sense that he was somehow back in his senior year, his dad sitting where Clay sat, talking to him, leading him. Alex stuffed his emotions and waited.

“The verse said, ‘There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads only to death.’” Clay straightened and pointed at Alex. “That’s you, Brady. You think you can go out there on the streets of LA and rid the world of everything bad.” A sad-sounding laugh came from Clay. “Can’t you see? That’s never going to happen. You keep thinking like that, and you’re going to get yourself killed.” He hesitated. “Then we can all sit around and talk about you and wonder what it’s all for ... because this department needs you. But we need you to be a deputy, not a machine.”

Alex couldn’t help but let the Scripture Clay had just quoted play again in his mind. *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads only to death.* He swallowed hard, trying to think of something to say. He didn’t want a Bible verse right now; he wanted real answers. Like how could a felon be back on the streets and able to shoot a deputy? And what had gone wrong in the suspect’s life that he was out shooting people in the first place? But the words of the verse wouldn’t leave him alone, wouldn’t let him go. They were exactly how he’d been feeling earlier, that sense of futility that everything he’d believed was only going to lead to his death. Maybe not today, when Bo had saved him from a bullet. But someday, sometime, when the bad guy at the traffic stop got a shot off a little sooner. Or when he got the routine house call to some ex-felon’s place, and ended up being the deputy rushed into surgery, clinging to life.

He cleared his throat, his eyes locked on Clay’s. “Then what’s the answer?” His tone was bitter, unbelieving. “If the way that seems right leads to death?” His voice rose a notch. “Because the God you serve stands by and watches while firefighters climb sixty flights of stairs to their deaths or,” he waved his hand toward the fence at the edge of the property, “while a deputy loses his life. So if God won’t take out the evil around us, who will?” He let his voice fall to barely a whisper. “We’re the only ones who can.”

“No!” Clay’s tone was intense again. “You’ve got it all wrong. Christ didn’t die so we could go out and win the fight against evil in the world.” He stopped, and his eyes grew softer. He pressed his open hand to the place over his heart. “He died so we might win the fight against evil *here*. Within us.”

Alex stared at his friend, baffled. The wind gusted through the patio area, and

he had to keep his voice raised just to be heard. “Here? Inside us, Clay? I thought we were the good guys.”

“No one’s good, Brady. You gotta remember at least that much.” He slid closer to the edge of the table, his voice ringing with sincerity. “That’s the role of the Holy Spirit ... to change us and mold us so we can be more like Christ — more loving and patient and kind, more forgiving. We’ll never be perfect. That’s His job. But God wants to work on the evil inside us. Only then can we do things bigger than ourselves.” He wasn’t finished. “The deputy that got shot? You know him. His name’s Jennings. Guy loves God so much he leaks joy everywhere he goes. Whether he lives or dies, people will be changed because of his story, his life story. Not because he was bent on ridding the city of bad guys, but because he stood for everything good and right and true. That’s why Christ came. To give people the chance to be like Jennings, joy-filled because he’s been forgiven.”

Alex had to blink again, because for a moment the voice speaking to him didn’t belong to Clay, but to Alex’s father. The words were the same his dad would say if he were here today. Before Alex could make a move, the door opened and Joe stepped out. The hope on his face told the story before he said a word. “Jennings is out of surgery. They were able to fix his spine.” There was a catch in Joe’s voice. “Looks like he could make a full recovery.”

Emotions Alex hadn’t felt in years came at him from all sides. He held Clay’s stare a few seconds longer, and then he nodded to both men as he left. Inside, he rounded up Bo and strode hard and fast for his squad car. Even now he felt eighteen again, and no matter how hard he tried to block out the message Clay had spoken to him, he couldn’t do it.

The words had cut through the brick and mortar around his heart and hit their mark dead-on.

He’d been striving for the same goal since he came to LA, but now for the first time he saw the reason for his feelings of futility, the reason why once in a while on his quest to get the crooks, he would simply come to the end of himself. Was it really possible that the only evil he could control was the evil within him? And if he were taken out on the next call, what would people say about him at his memorial service? That he was a talented cop? Was that all his legacy would ever be?

The idea was too sad for him to contemplate. He tried to dismiss everything Clay had said. Whatever evil existed inside him, it was nothing compared to the darkness on the streets. Alex mustered up a determination he’d never felt before. His father would be alive today if it weren’t for the evil out there. As long as he had breath, he would fight against crime and terrorism. But in case he died trying, he would do one more thing before the night was up. He’d

drive to Jamie Michaels' house, knock on the door, and do the thing he should've done weeks ago.

Read the journal entry.

Hoofstuk 20

Die oproep om bystand kom net ná tienuur die aand deur. Alex hoor dit net toe hy wil omdraai om in 'n westelike rigting op die Ventura-deurpad te ry om te gaan parkeer by die pad wat na Oak Canyon Estates lei. Die Santa Anawinde is weer terug, en Alex twyfel nie daaraan dat die ROA die area gaan teiken as Uil en die ander 'n kans het nie.

"Wees gereed, Bo," hy leun terug en vryf sy hond. "Jy gaan my hiermee help."

Bo blaf een keer, op sy hoede en angstig. Hy kan die verandering aanvoel aangesien die motor vinniger ry, en 'n bietjie adrenalien bruis reeds deur Alex se are.

"Ek weet, my hond ... ons is amper daar." Alex vat die afrit na Thousand Oaks Boulevard en dwing homself om te konsentreer op die oproep wat hy ontvang het. Dit is 'n roetine-ondersoek waartydens motors afgetrek word deur 'n polisieman met die naam Waller, 'n veteraan in die polisiemag. 'n Motor is by die laaste verkeerslig op die heuwel afgetrek en 'n oop drankbottel en 'n dronk man met 'n houding is ter sprake. Waller het vir die man gesê om in sy motor te bly terwyl hy na die polisiemotor toe loop. Hy moet die man in hegtenis neem, maar moet vir bystand vra voordat hy dit alleen aanpak.

Alex trap die petrolpedaal dieper in en sit die sirene aan. Die wind waai deur die bome bo hom en hy ril. Die ROA is waarskynlik op hierdie oomblik besig om hulle volgende veldbrand te beplan, net soos die terroriste hulle aaklige dade in die dae voor 11 September beplan het. Hy kyk by die venster aan die passasierskant uit en sien 'n liggrys rookwolk in die verte. Dit is 'n week sedert die brande by die ander ontwikkelings en daar is steeds niemand in hegtenis geneem nie. Speurders het vir Uil en baie ander mense ondervra, maar hulle het ontken dat hulle betrokke was en daar is nie genoeg bewyse om iemand in hegtenis te neem nie. Dit is nie asof hulle kaarte dra wat bewys hulle is lede van die ROA nie.

Alex voel hoe die frustrasie in hom opbou. Die ouens moet op heter daad betrap word; daar is nie 'n ander manier nie. En hy is oortuig daarvan dat Oak Canyon Estates steeds op die ROA se lysie is, heel waarskynlik volgende. Alex kan aan niks beters dink as om kamp op te slaan op die grondpad en die lafaards op heter daad te betrap nie.

Waller se stem klink op oor die radio. "Verdagte tree effens vreemd op, 'n bietjie te beweeglik. Hy gaan moontlik op die vlug slaan."

Nie tydens my skof nie, dink Alex. Hy vryf weer vir Bo. "As hy hardloop is hy joune, Bo. Net joune."

Hierdie keer reageer Bo deur twee keer te blaf. Hy loop heen en weer op die agterste sitplek, gereed vir wat ook al van hom verwag word. Alex leun terug en vryf hom, en toe hy dit doen, sien hy Bo se ernstige, brave oë in die truspieëltjie. Hy is so 'n goeie hond, so 'n toegewyde kollega. Sedert Alex die werk aanvaar het, is dit al wat hy ooit wou hê – om 'n polisieman met dieselfde hart en lojaliteit te wees, om net so opreg soos Bo te wees, gereed om enige tyd sy lewe af te lê as dit beteken dat nog 'n misdadiger in Los Angeles gevang kan word.

Alex kan Waller se motor voor hom sien, en net voor dit, die motor waarin die verdagte steeds sit. Net toe Alex sy motor se sirene afsit en agter die polisiemotor gaan stop, maak die verdagte sy deur oop, spring uit sy motor en hardloop oor die straat tot in 'n ruigte van struik en bome.

Waller se dringende stem kan oor die radio gehoor word. “Verdagte besig om te voet te vlug, ek herhaal, verdagte besig om te voet te vlug.”

Alex het skaars tyd om te laat weet hy het so pas daar aangekom en sal die man agternasit, toe het hy al vir Bo losgemaak, sy geweer uitgehaal en is hy besig om na Waller toe te hardloop. Hy is ook reeds uit sy motor, geweer in die hand. “Ons sal eerste gaan.” Hy hardloop in die rigting van die bome. “Hou jou wapen gereed.”

Selfs al het die man net 'n minuut voorsprong, is die situasie skielik gevaarlik. Die man kan enige plek in die bosse wees, agter 'n boom wegkruip waar hy dit binnegegaan het of na die ander kant van die bosse hardloop. Alex laat Bo ver vooruit hardloop en onmiddellik tel die hond die verdagte se spoor op. Bo gaan staan en blaf, sy kop in een rigting, en hy wag vir die bevel.

“Vang hom, my hond!” skree Alex. “Vang hom!”

Bo trek aan die leiband, hardloop so vinnig as wat hy kan met Alex aan die ander punt daarvan. Alex hardloop agter sy hond aan tot in die bosse, die grond is oneweredig onder sy voete. Agter hom skakel Waller 'n flitslig aan wat 'n bietjie help, maar hulle jaag so dat hulle blindelings die donker in hardloop. As dit nie vir Bo was wat hulle lei nie, sou hulle nooit die verdagte se spoor teen hierdie tempo kon agtervolg nie.

Ewe skielik is daar 'n beweging in 'n oop deel voor links, maar toe die verdagte uitspring en sy geweer lig om op Alex en die ander polisieman te skiet, pyl Bo reguit op hom af. Die verdagte vuur 'n skoot en Alex voel hoe die koeël langs hom verbyvlieg. Voordat die man weer kan skiet, lyk dit of hy die hond sien wat reguit op hom afpyl. Hy draai sy geweer na Bo en sit sy vinger op die sneller.

“Vang hom, Bo!” skree Alex en sy slape klop. *Nie Bo nie. Moet net nie dat hy vir Bo skiet nie ...*

Die verdagte probeer skiet, maar dit is te laat. Bo spring in die man se rigting en hy val met so 'n krag agteroor dat hy tot binne-in die bosse val. Hy kreun toe hy op die droë bosse neerslaan, en terselfdertyd vuur hy weer sy wapen. Hierdie keer seil die koeël sonder enige gevaar kant toe, en vinnig, voordat hy weer sy geweer kan ophang, byt Bo die verdagte aan sy arm, druk hom teen die

grond vas en hou hom daar.

Bo gaan mal, byt die man se arm vas en grom vir hom.

“Haai!” skree die verdagte in pyn. “Kry hom af! Help my! Kry die hond van my af!”

“Gooi jou wapen waar ons dit kan sien!” beveel Alex.

Die man aarsel en Bo verstaan duidelik dat die stryd nog nie verby is nie. Hy grom harder en byt dieper in die man se arm, skud dit asof dit ’n speelding is. Die verdagte skree weer. “Oukei! Hier!” Hy gooi sy geweer op die grond neer waar die polisiemanne staan. “Kry die hond van my af!”

Alex se asem jaag steeds. Waller kruip tot langs hom en laat sy flitslig op die geweer op die grond skyn. Hy tel dit op, druk dit in sy agtersak en tree weer terug tot langs Alex.

“Kry die hond van my af!” Die man skree nou skril, desperaat.

Langs Alex praat Waller oor die radio en gee die inligting oor die inhegtenisname deur, en laat weet waar die ander hulle kan kry om bystand te verleen.

Alex tree nader aan die verdagte. “Bo ... laat los.”

Nog polisiemanne kom van agter hulle aangehardloop, en in die volgende paar minute word die verdagte geboei en weggelei. Alex vryf vir Bo oor sy sy terwyl hy langs hom loop terug motor toe. “Goeie werk, Bo ... Goeie werk.” Bo het alweer sy lewe gered. As die verdagte se aandag nie afgelei is deur ’n Duitse Herdershond wat deur die bosse aangehardloop gekom en op hom afgestorm het nie, sou hy ’n paar maal geskiet het voordat Alex en Waller ’n kans kon kry om terug te skiet.

Die wind waai en die bome om hulle buig behoorlik. Toe hulle uit die ruigte in die straat is, verbeel Alex hom hy ruik rook. Óf die ou vure het weer vlam gevat as gevolg van die wind, óf ’n nuwe gebied is besig om te brand. Hy loop met Bo na die polisiemotor, haal die waterbottel uit en gooi van die water in die hond se blou bak. Bo slurp dit op, hou net een keer op drink om dankbaar na Alex te kyk.

“Oubaas se hond ... Mooi so, Bo.” Alex kniel langs hom en vryf die sagte plekkie agter sy oor – Bo se gunsteling.

Waller kom na hulle toe aangestap. Sy asem jaag steeds, stadig besig om te ontspan na die adrenalien wat deur sy are gepomp het. Hy leun teen Alex se motor. “Die eerste koeël het jou amper getref.”

“Die tweede een sou.” Alex bly na sy hond kyk. “Bo het geweet waar die man was voordat hy uit die bosse gekom het.”

Hy hou sy hand uit en skud Alex s’n. “Baie dankie vir jou wonderlike bystand, Brady.” Hy draai om en loop om aan die verslae te gaan werk.

Alex kniel weer en vryf Bo se oor. “Is jy honger, Bo?” Hy hou ’n sak met kos in sy motor vir tye soos dié wanneer hulle halfpad deur ’n skof is met ’n paar besige oproepe agter die rug. Hy skep ’n paar korrels kos in ’n ander blou bak en gee dit vir die hond. Weer lig Bo sy oë dankbaar in Alex se rigting. Die hond sal vir hom sterf, dit is nie eers te betwyfel nie.

Alex voeg sy opmerkings by tot die verslag, gooi die res van Bo se water uit, en maak die deur vir die hond oop. “Komaan, Bo. Kom ons gaan terug hoofkantoor toe.” Hy sit die twee bakke op mekaar onder by die sitplek neer en klim agter die stuurwiel in. Hy moet sy eie verslag skryf voordat hy weer op patrollie kan uitgaan.

Hy voel hoe die wind sterk teen sy motor waai toe hy op die deurpad klim. Hy bel vinnig die Lost Hills-polisiestase. “Is daar iemand wat ’n ogie oor Oak Canyon Estates hou?” Hy wil nou nie sy neus in sake steek nie, maar hy hou niks van die feit dat hy in die teenoorgestelde rigting ry, weg van die plek waar die volgende aanval deur eko-terroriste kan plaasvind nie.

“Dis onder beheer. Die ontwikkelaar het ’n paar uur terug gebel en gevra vir nog ondersteuning.”

“Goed so. Brandstigters hou baie van aande soos vanaand.” Alex stel homself voor hoe Uil en die ander twee narre met die heuwel op ry en hulleself teen ’n polisieman vasloop.

Halfpad na die polisiestase dink hy aan nare dinge. Wat as Bo nie vanaand by hom was nie? Wat as die gewapende man hom met daardie tweede skoot doodgeskiet het? Alex leun terug in sy sitplek. Nutteloosheid spoel soos ’n vloedgolf oor hom. As hy in ’n bos sou sterf nadat hy deur ’n dronk man geskiet is, wat sou sy lewe dan saak gemaak het? Ja, hy het al ’n paar skelms gevang, maar vir elke inhegtenisname is daar tien skelms wat wegkom, nog ’n klomp skurke wat grootword en in die straat-oorlog rondom hulle veg.

Hy dink aan Jamie Bryan, die feit dat sy ’n joernaalinskrywing gekry het oor sy pa wat Alex haar nie toegelaat het om met hom te deel nie. Op ’n sekere manier is dit dalk sy pa se laaste woorde aan hom, maar hy het dit geweier, weggewys. As hy daar in die ruigte doodgegaan het, sou hy nooit die kans gehad het om daarna te luister nie.

En wat van Holly? Hy het haar ook weggewys. Maar hy wonder steeds: Is sy in New York? Het sy op iemand anders verlief geraak en met hom getrou, soos hy ver wag sy sou? Het sy hom dalk vergewe, hom vergeet soos hy graag wou hê sy moet? As die gewapende man hom geskiet het, sou Alex ook nooit die antwoorde op daardie vrae gehad het nie.

’n Gevoel van niksbeduidendheid vul en omring Alex, versmoor hom amper en trek hom tot in ’n maalkolk van nutteloosheid. Verspilde tyd en jare en dae en moeite. Hy kan elke dag honderde skelms vang, maar sal dit die boosheid in die stad enigszins verminder? Hy sit regop en skraap die moed en vasberadenheid bymekaar, die blote wil en sin van geregtigheid wat sy hart oorgeneem het. Hy sal dalk nooit die stad van al die slegte en gevaarlike dinge kan bevry nie, maar met elke skelm wat hy agternasit, met elke inhegtenisname, word een gesin gespaar, kan een hoërskoolleerling huis toe gaan sonder om te vind dat sy gesin uitmekaargeskeur is.

Die wanhoop verdwyn geleidelik en hy kan weer asemhaal. Die wind waai woens toe hy by die hoofkantoor kom en saam met Bo ingaan. In die teekamer kry hy vir Clay en Joe waar hulle koffie drink. Daar is bekommernis op hul

gesigte te bespeur.

Clay sien hom eerste. Hy frons en wys vir Alex om by hulle aan te sluit. “Ons het gehoor hoe jy die man agternagesit het. Welgedaan, Brady.”

“Dankie.” Alex kyk na Clay, dan na Joe en weer na Clay. “Wat is fout?”

“Een van ons manne is geskiet.” Joe se stem is swaar, vol ontmoediging. “In die ooste van Los Angeles. Hy het gereageer op ’n klag van rusverstoring en is in die nek geskiet. Die verdagte is ’n man wat jy ’n paar maande terug in hegtenis geneem het.”

Alex se maag trek op ’n knop en hy bal sy vuiste. Ongelooflike pyn spoel oor hom. Dieselfde pyn wat hy daardie Dinsdagoggend gevoel het toe hy by die huis ingestap het, sy ma wat na die TV kyk, die Twin Towers in twee hope met sy pa iewers daaronder. ’n Pyn wat sy hele wese oorneem. Alex sit sy voet op die stoel die naaste aan hom, sit sy elmboog op sy knie en laat hang sy kop.

“Hy was die afgelope vier uur in die teater. Sy toestand is kritiek.” Dit klink selde of Clay teen die grond is, maar vandag is dit wel die geval. “Hulle dink nie hy gaan weer kan loop nie, dis nou as hy dit maak. Die koeël het sy ruggraat getref.”

’n Onderdrukte kreungeluid bou in Alex se bors op en dan roep hy angstig uit. Hy slaan met sy vuist op die tafel en storm na die hoek waar die koffie staan. Hy voel Bo langs hom, hoor hoe die hond saggies huil. Alex blaas sy asem hard deur sy neus uit en buig effens om met sy vingers aan Bo se kop te raak. “Dis oukei, my hond. Sit, Bo.” Die hond hou sy oë op Alex terwyl hy ’n paar tree agteruit gee en op die koue vloer gaan sit. Alex voel moeg, fisiek verslaan. Hy kyk oor sy skouer. “Die verdagte?”

Clay loop na hom toe. “Geskiet en dood op die toneel. Twee ander is in hegtenis geneem.”

Die misdadiger sal nie weer iemand doodmaak nie, maar hy verteenwoordig steeds nog ’n dood, meer hartseer op straat. Vanaand sal die misdadiger se ma en pa, sy broers of susters, miskien selfs sy kinders vir altyd verander word omdat hy weg is. Hy het die man ’n paar maande terug in hegtenis geneem, maar dit was nie goed genoeg nie. Die man het nie verander nie, nie teruggegaan huis toe en ’n goeie burger geword nie. Dan het Alex se inhegtenisname mos nie gehelp nie? Die boosheid op straat seëvier steeds as ’n polisieman uitgeroep word en in die proses geskiet word. Hy laat sak weer sy kop en hou vas aan die rand van die tafel waarop die koffiemasjien staan.

“Alex ... ” Clay sit sy arm om Alex se skouer. “Daar is niks wat jy kon doen nie. Die hof het hom vry verklaar.”

“Ek weet.” Alex forseer die woorde deur sy tande wat hy op mekaar kners. Hy lig sy kop en wys na die vertrek. “Maar as die polisie departement en die polisiemanne, die honde en die SWAT-spanne, as niemand dit kan keer nie, nie eers ’n duik kan maak in die oorlog daarbuite nie, wat is die doel dan?”

Clay se oë word emosieloos. “Komaan, Brady. Ons moet praat.”

Alex is op die punt om te stry, maar hy wil hoor wat Clay te sê het, watter

argument sy kaptein kan aanvoer om hulle werk te regverdig in 'n tyd soos dié. Hy beveel Bo om te bly, en stap agter Clay aan na buite, na 'n klein binnehof met 'n paar leë tafeltjies. Clay sit op die rand van die een die naaste aan hulle en sit sy voete op die bankie.

“Hierdie gesprek moes al lankal plaasgevind het.” Alex is skielik nuuskierig en sy pyn en hooploosheid verdwyn vir 'n oomblik. Hy knip sy oë en wag.

“Jy is verkeerd oor die boosheid om ons.” Clay se stem is ernstig, sy stem harder as gewoonlik. “Ek weet jy het eens op 'n tyd in Christus geglo. Jy het self so gesê. So wat ek nou gaan sê, wil ek hê jy moet met ore hoor wat jy toe gehad het. Die ore wat jy voor 11 September gehad het.” Die wind waai om hulle, waai deur Alex se hare en brand sy oë. Hy wil terughardloop binnetoe, sy hond kry en wegry. Maar hy trek sy oë op skrefies teen die wind en luister, hoop eintlik Clay gaan iets sê wat hom sal laat verstaan hoekom hy voel soos hy nou voel.

“Nou die dag het ek 'n teksvers geles wat netsowel vir jou geskryf kon gewees het.” Clay leun vorentoe, sy voorarms op sy knieë. Hy sien seker die teësinigheid in Alex se oë, want hy trek sy een wenkbrou op. “Ja, 'n Bybelvers. Dit is steeds die beste wysheid op aarde, maak nie saak wat jy dink nie.”

Alex vou sy arms voor sy bors en voel weer daardie gevoel, die snaakse gevoel dat hy op die een of ander manier weer terug is op hoërskool, dat sy pa sit waar Clay sit en met hom praat, hom lei. Alex onderdruk sy emosies en wag.

“Die teksvers sê: ‘Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; agterna kom dit uit dat dit na die dood gelei het.’” Clay staan regop en wys met sy vinger na Alex. “Dit is jy, Brady. Jy dink jy kan Los Angeles se strate invaar en die wêreld red van alles wat sleg is.” Clay lag, maar dit klink hartseer. “Kan jy nie sien nie? Dit gaan nooit gebeur nie. As jy dit bly dink, gaan jy jou eie dood veroorsaak.” Hy aarsel. “Dan kan ons almal hier rondsit en oor jou praat en wonder wat die sin van alles is ... want hierdie departement het jou nodig. Maar ons het jou nodig as polisieman, nie as robot nie.”

Alex kan dit nie keer dat die teksvers wat Clay nou net aangehaal het, weer deur sy gedagtes flits nie. *Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; agterna kom dit uit dat dit na die dood gelei het.* Hy sluk hard, probeer aan iets dink om te sê. Hy wil nie nou 'n Bybelvers hoor nie; hy wil regte antwoorde hê. Soos hoekom 'n skelm terug kan wees op straat en 'n polisieman kan skiet? En wat het in die verdagte se lewe verkeerd geloop dat hy in die eerste plek mense skiet? Maar die teksvers se woorde bly hom pla, wil hom nie uitlos nie. Dit is presies soos hy vroeër gevoel het. Die gevoel van niksbeduidendheid dat alles waarin hy glo net tot sy dood gaan lei. Miskien nie vandag toe Bo hom van daardie koeël gered het nie, maar eendag. Eendag wanneer die skelm by die verkeerslig vinniger op hom skiet. Of wanneer hy uitgeroep word na 'n misdadiger se huis en daar ook met hom hospitaal toe gejaag moet word terwyl hy om sy lewe veg.

Hy maak keel skoon en kyk diep in Clay se oë. “Wat is die antwoord dan?” Sy stemtoon is bitter, asof hy niks glo nie. “As dit wat reg lyk tot die dood lei?” Hy praat effens harder. “Want die God wat jy dien, kyk toe hoe brandweermanne sestig verdiepings hoog met die trap op hardloop en doodgaan, of,” hy waai met sy hand in die rigting van die heining om die polisiestatie, “hoe ’n polisieman sy lewe verloor. As God dan nie die boosheid om ons gaan wegvat nie, wie gaan?” Sy stem is nou byna net ’n fluistering. “Ons is die enigstes wat kan.”

“Nee!” Clay se stemtoon is ernstig. “Jy verstaan verkeerd. Christus het nie gesterf sodat ons kan uitgaan en die geveg teen die bose in die wêreld wen nie.” Hy bly stil, sy oë raak sagter. Hy druk met sy handpalm teen sy bors. “Hy het gesterf sodat ons die geveg teen die boosheid hier kan wen. In ons harte.”

Alex staar na sy vriend, oorbluf. Die wind suis deur die binnehof, en hy moet hard praat sodat hy gehoor kan word. “Hier? Binne-in ons, Clay? Ek het gedink ons is die goeie ouens.”

“Niemand is goed nie, Brady. Jy behoort dít ten minste te kan onthou.” Hy skuif tot op die rand van die tafel, sy stem baie opreg. “Dit is die rol van die Heilige Gees ... om ons te verander en te vorm sodat ons meer soos Christus kan wees – meer liefdevol, geduldiger, vriendeliker, meer bereid om te vergewe. Ons sal nooit perfek wees nie. Dit is God se werk. Maar Hy wil hê ons moet aan die boosheid in ons werk. Slegs dan kan ons dinge groter as onself vermag.” Hy is nog nie klaar nie. “Die polisieman wat geskiet is? Jy ken hom. Sy naam is Jennings. Die man is so lief vir God sy vreugde is aansteeklik. Of hy nou bly leef of sterf, mense gaan verander as gevolg van sy storie, sy lewenstorie. Nie omdat hy daarop uit was om die stad van misdadigers te red nie, maar omdat hy gestaan het vir alles wat goed en reg en waar is. Dit is hoekom Christus gekom het. Om vir mense die geleentheid te gee om soos Jennings te wees, vol vreugde omdat hy vergewe is.”

Alex moet weer sy oë knip, want vir ’n oomblik is die stem wat met hom praat nie Clay s’n nie, maar sy pa s’n. Dit is presies wat sy pa sou sê as hy vandag hier was. Voordat Alex iets kan sê of doen, gaan die deur oop en Joe kom uit. Sy gesigsuitdrukking spreek van hoop en vertel die storie voordat hy iets kan sê. “Jennings is uit die teater. Hulle kon sy ruggraat regkry.” Met ’n stem wat skielik hartseer klink, sê hy: “Dit lyk of hy heeltemal gaan regkom.” Emosies wat Alex in jare nie ervaar het nie, slaan van alle kante af op hom toe. Hy kyk vir nog ’n paar sekondes na Clay, en knik dan vir albei mans toe hy loop. Hy gaan haal vir Bo en loop vasberade en vinnig na sy polisiemotor. Selfs nou voel dit of hy agtien jaar oud is, en maak nie saak hoe hard hy probeer om te vergeet wat Clay nou net vir hom gesê het nie, hy kry dit nie reg nie.

Die woorde het deur die pleister en steen om sy hart gebreek en hom hard getref.

Hy streef dieselfde doel na vandat hy Los Angeles toe gekom het, maar nou,

vir die eerste keer, verstaan hy die rede vir sy gevoel van niksbeduidendheid, die rede hoekom hy soms eenvoudig moeg raak wanneer hy daarna streef om die misdadigers te vang. Is dit regtig moontlik dat die enigste boosheid wat hy kan beheer in homself is? En as hy moet sterf wanneer hy weer uitgeroep word, wat sal mense by sy begrafnis van hom sê? Dat hy 'n talentvolle polisieman was? Is dit al wat sy nalatenskap sal behels?

Dit is vir hom te hartseer om hieroor te dink. Hy probeer vergeet van alles wat Clay gesê het. Watter boosheid ook al in hom is, dit is niks in vergelyking met die boosheid op straat nie. Alex voel meer vasberade as wat hy ooit tevore gevoel het. Sy pa sou vandag geleef het as dit nie vir die boosheid daarbuite was nie. So lank as wat hy leef, sal hy teen misdaad en terrorisme veg. Maar vir in geval hy sterf terwyl hy probeer, sal hy nog een ding doen voordat die aand verby is. Hy gaan na Jamie se huis toe ry, aan die deur klop, en die één ding doen wat hy al weke gelede moes gedoen het. Die joernaalinskrywing lees.

TWENTY-ONE

Jamie never slept well when Clay worked overtime. She was at peace with his job, the sort of peace she'd never had when she was married to Jake, back when she didn't want to believe in a God who would let firefighters die in the line of duty. After Jake's death, his Bible and his journal had led her into a life-saving relationship with God, one that brought with it a peace that passed all understanding. A peace that wives of police officers rarely felt.

But that didn't mean she slept well.

Sierra and CJ were long since asleep, and she was surfing the Internet looking for a Michael O'Brien CD on iTunes when she heard a knock at the door. For a split second, she didn't move or breathe or allow herself to process the sound. Then, in a rush, the possibilities came slamming into her. Clay wouldn't knock, so if someone was at her door at this hour it could only mean ... She exhaled. *Not again. This couldn't be happening again. God ... whatever it is, You're with me.* Gradually, her panic leveled off enough so she could move through the house to the front door. *Please, God, not Clay ... please ...*

By the time she reached the door, she couldn't feel her legs or her feet, couldn't draw a complete breath. *Help me, God ... whatever this is ...* She reached for the handle and opened the door.

Standing there on the front porch was Alex Brady. He was in uniform and his squad car was parked outside, but he looked wide-eyed and half desperate. "Mrs. Michaels ... I'm sorry, this isn't about Clay. It's just that ... I ..."

"Alex ..." Jamie exhaled with relief and clung to the only thing she needed to hear. *This wasn't about Clay.* She took a step back. "Come in." She was in a T-shirt and sweats. The wind was too strong for her to hear him very well. When he stepped inside, she closed the door behind him and tried to imagine what would've brought Alex here at this hour. "What is it?"

"The journal entry." Alex's mouth sounded dry. He ran his tongue along his lips, clearly nervous. "I've changed my mind. I'd like to read it, if that's okay."

Jamie was completely caught off guard. Panic from moments ago became a glimmer of joy, surging through her and giving her hope. If he wanted to know about the journal entry, then God was doing something in his heart. She took a step toward the stairs. "Let me get it. I can make a copy of that page." She was already walking up the stairs. "Would that work?"

"Yes, thanks." He shifted his weight from one foot to another and clasped his hands behind his back. "Sorry to trouble you."

"No trouble." She was at the top of the stairs, and she went to the closet and found the journal. It took her less than a couple of minutes to jog back down to the office printer and make a copy of the correct page. She tucked the journal beneath her arm and handed him the copy. "Here."

"Thank you, Mrs. Michaels." He took the piece of paper, folded it, and slipped it into his back pocket. "I ... I know it's crazy of me. Stopping by at this hour."

"Call me Jamie, remember?" She folded her arms across her stomach and tried to look beyond the crumbling walls in his eyes. Her voice was soft, and she prayed he would hear her. Really hear her. "God's doing something in you, isn't He?"

For a long while Alex just stared at her, as if the thought wasn't something he'd actually processed yet. Then he gave a slow shake of his head. "I don't know." He patted his back pocket. "But I couldn't go another night without reading this."

Jamie smiled. "I hope you hear your dad's voice when you read it." She lightly touched his arm. "We're still praying for you."

"Thank you." He nodded to her, his expression closed off again. "Thanks for taking the time." He was already at the door. "See you later." And with that, he shut the door behind him and was gone.

She waited until she heard his car pull away before she returned to the office and called Clay. Once she had him on the phone, she told him about Alex's visit and what he'd come to get. "He looked different. Like something might be starting to change in him."

"Hmmm." Clay sounded thoughtful. "He must've gone straight there after our talk."

Jamie loved this, the way they were working together now on Alex's behalf. "What'd you talk about?"

"Everything I've been wanting to say for a year. I told him about the Bible

verses that have been stuck in my mind the last few months and how it wasn't possible for him to rid the city of everything bad." Clay told her everything about their talk, and how he and Joe had prayed for Alex when he left with his dog half an hour earlier. "And then he comes straight to our house."

Chills ran down her arms. Nothing beat the thrill of knowing God was at work around them. "We'll keep praying."

"Definitely." He hesitated. "How's the wind there?"

"Strong." She wandered with the cordless phone to the nearest window. "Stronger than it was earlier. Any new fires?"

"Not yet, but we're waiting. If the REA's going to strike again, it'll be soon. We all know it."

"One more reason to pray." Jamie returned to the phone's base. "Thanks, Clay."

"For what?" His voice was tender, speaking straight to her heart even over the phone lines.

"For helping Alex."

"We're better as a team." There was a smile in his voice. "Now go get some sleep."

She knew better than to make promises she couldn't keep. So instead she told him she loved him, and when the call was over, she went to the window and stared at the wind blowing the trees. Whatever God was doing in Alex's heart, she had a feeling the biggest changes were yet to come. Before another moment passed, she silently lifted her voice to heaven, asking God that between Clay's talk and Jake's journal entry, Alex wouldn't only be ready for the battles he'd face on the streets of LA in the coming days.

He'd also be ready for the one raging in his heart.

Hoofstuk 21

Jamie slaap nooit lekker wanneer Clay oortyd werk nie. Sy het vrede gemaak met sy werk, die soort vrede wat sy nooit gehad het toe sy met Jake getroud was nie, toe sy nie in 'n God wou glo wat toelaat dat brandweermanne sterf nie. Ná Jake se dood het sy Bybel en joernaal haar na 'n verhouding met God gelei, en dit het vir haar 'n vrede gegee wat alle verstand te bowe gaan. 'n Vrede wat vroue van polisiemanne selde ervaar.

Maar dit beteken nie sy slaap lekker nie.

Sierra en CJ slaap lankal reeds. Sy is besig op die internet om na 'n CD van Michael O'Brien op iTunes te soek, toe sy iemand aan die deur hoor klop. Vir 'n oomblik sit sy doodstil, haal nie asem nie en maak ook nie 'n geluid nie. Dan, skielik, spoel die moontlikhede oor haar. Clay sal nie klop nie. As iemand dus hierdie tyd van die nag by die deur is, kan dit net een ding beteken ... Sy asem uit. *Nie weer nie. Dit kan nie weer gebeur nie. Here ... wat dit ook al is, U is by my.* Die skok verlaat haar geleidelik en sy loop deur die huis op pad voordeur toe. *Asseblief, Here, nie Clay nie ... asseblief...*

Toe sy by die voordeur kom, kan sy nie haar bene of voete voel nie, en sy haal vlak asem. *Help my, Here ... wat dit ook al is ...* Sy steek haar hand uit en maak die deur oop.

Voor haar staan Alex Brady. Hy is in sy uniform en sy polisiemotor staan voor die huis geparkeer. Sy oë is groot en hy lyk effens desperaat. "Mevrou Michaels ... Ek is jammer, dit is nie oor Clay nie. Dit is net dat ... ek ..."

"Alex ... " Jamie asem verlig uit en hou vas aan die een ding wat sy wou hoor. *Dit is nie oor Clay nie.* Sy tree terug. "Kom in." Sy het 'n T-hemp en 'n sweetpakkbroek aan. Die wind is te sterk vir haar om hom goed te hoor. Toe hy inkom, maak sy die deur agter hom toe en probeer dink wat Alex dié tyd van die dag by hulle maak. "Is iets fout?"

"Die joernaalinskrywing." Alex se mond klink droog. Hy lek oor sy lippe, duidelik op sy senuwees. "Ek het van plan verander. Ek sal dit graag wil lees, as dit reg is."

Jamie is heeltemal onkant betrap. Die vrees van 'n paar oomblikke gelede verander in vreugde wat deur haar spoel en vir haar hoop gee. As hy die joernaalinskrywing wil lees, is God besig om iets in sy hart te doen. Sy gee 'n tree in die rigting van die trap. "Kom ek gaan haal dit. Ek kan 'n afskrif van daardie bladsy maak." Sy is alreeds besig om boontoe te loop. "Sal dit reg wees?"

"Ja, dankie." Hy verskuif sy gewig van die een voet na die ander en vou sy hande saam agter sy rug. "Jammer dat ek jou pla."

"Jy pla glad nie." Sy is heel bo en gaan na die kas om die joernaal uit te haal. Ná net 'n paar minute draf sy terug onder toe na die kantoor met die fotokopieerder en sy maak 'n afskrif van die regte bladsy. Sy sit die joernaal onder haar arm en gee vir hom die afskrif. "Hier."

"Dankie, mevrou Michaels." Hy vat die papier, vou dit, en sit dit in sy broek se agtersak. "Ek ... ek weet dit is gek van my om hierdie tyd van die nag hier aan te kom."

"Noem my Jamie, asseblief." Sy vou haar arms voor haar en probeer verby die krakende mure in sy oë kyk. Haar stem is sag en sy bid dat hy haar sal hoor. Haar werklik sal verstaan. "God is besig om iets in jou te verander, nie waar nie?"

Vir 'n hele rukkie staan Alex net na haar, asof dit iets is waaroor hy nog nie gedink het nie. Dan skud hy sy kop stadig. "Ek weet nie." Hy slaan op sy agtersak. "Maar ek kon nie nog 'n dag langer nié hierdie lees nie."

Jamie glimlag. “Ek hoop jy hoor jou pa se stem wanneer jy dit lees.” Sy raak liggies aan sy arm. “Ons bid steeds vir jou.”

“Dankie.” Hy knik vir haar, sy gesigsuitdrukking weer geslote. “Dankie vir jou tyd.” Hy is reeds by die deur. “Sien jou weer.” Dan is hy uit by die deur en maak dit agter hom toe.

Sy wag totdat sy sy motor hoor wegtrek voordat sy teruggaan kantoor toe en vir Clay bel. Toe sy met hom praat, vertel sy hom dat Alex daar was en wat hy kom haal het. “Hy lyk anders. Asof iets in hom besig is om te verander.”

“Hmm.” Clay klink in gedagte. “Hy het seker net na ons gesprek soontoe gegaan.”

Jamie is mal daaroor, hoe hulle nou saamwerk om Alex se onthalwe. “Waaroor het julle gepraat?”

“Alles wat ek al vir ’n jaar wil sê. Ek het hom van die Bybelvers vertel wat die afgelope paar maande in my kop bly vassteek het en hoe dit vir hom onmoontlik is om die stad van alles wat sleg is te red.” Clay vertel vir haar waarom hulle alles gepraat het en hoe hy en Joe vir Alex gebid het toe hy en sy hond ’n halfuur gelede daar weg is. “En toe gaan hy reguit na ons huis toe.” Sy kry hoendervleis. Niks is beter as die opgewondenheid om te weet God is om hulle aan die werk nie. “Ons sal aanhou bid.”

“Definitief.” Hy aarsel. “Hoe lyk die wind daar?”

“Dit waai sterk.” Sy loop met die koordlose foon na die naaste venster. “Sterker as vroeër. Enige nuwe brande?”

“Nog nie, maar ons wag. Die ROA gaan binnekort weer toeslaan. Ons almal weet dit.”

“Nog ’n rede om te bid.” Jamie stap na die foon se voetstuk. “Dankie, Clay.”

“Waarvoor?” Sy stem is sag, en hy praat direk met haar hart, selfs oor die telefoonlyn.

“Dat jy vir Alex help.”

“Ons werk beter as ’n span.” Daar is ’n glimlag in sy stem. “Maar nou moet jy gaan slaap.”

Sy weet van beter as om iets te belowe wat sy nie kan nakom nie. Daarom sê sy eerder dat sy lief is vir hom, en toe sy die telefoon neersit, gaan sy na die venster en staar na die wind wat deur die bome waai. Wat God ook al besig is om in Alex se hart te doen, sy is seker dat die grootste veranderinge nog gaan gebeur. Voordat nog tyd verbygaan, bid sy saggies tot God en vra Hom dat die gesprek met Clay en Jake se joernaal, Alex nie net sal voorberei op die oorlog waarmee hy die volgende paar dae op die strate van Los Angeles gekonfronteer sal word nie, maar ook dat hy gereed sal wees vir die oorlog wat in sy hart woed.

TWENTY-TWO

Alex was desperate for the chance to pull over and read the piece of paper in his pocket, but there was only one place he was willing to park on a windy night like this. The road leading up to the Oak Canyon Estates. He refused to think about what Clay had said or the news about the deputy or about the chase earlier that had almost cost his life. He merely kept his eyes on the road, and one hand on the wheel. With the other hand, he patted Bo. The dog was on edge, sensing something wrong in Alex.

“It’s okay, Bo ... don’t worry, boy, everything’s okay.” He said the words again and again, but they never quite sounded convincing. He wasn’t okay, not hardly. His very soul felt like it was unraveling. Since 9/11 he hadn’t worked this hard to keep himself from feeling. For years he’d gone through life refusing his deepest emotions, driven by a single goal. But now his heart hurt from everything he was trying not to process. He checked the clock on his dashboard. His shift was up at three in the morning, so he still had another couple hours. He sped up some, already picturing the place where he would park to read the journal entry.

Then it happened.

Up ahead, a pale green Honda exited the freeway on the off-ramp before Las Virgenes Road. The same type of car spotted by witnesses leaving the scene of one of the arson fires set last week. Alex ran the plates as he followed the car. The search turned up nothing, but that didn’t matter. The REA arsonist hadn’t been caught yet, so of course there wasn’t a warrant out for the guy. At the base of the exit, Alex flipped on his lights. He expected a chase, so he was surprised when the car’s driver slowed down, put on his blinker, and made a safe lane change before pulling into the parking lot of a 7-Eleven.

Alex kept Bo in the car for now. As he approached the vehicle, he had one hand on his gun and a flashlight in the other. The wind beat against his face. For the second time that day, his adrenaline went into overdrive. This was it. The occupants of the car were clearly on their way to set another fire, but he’d caught them before they could do the job. In a few minutes, he would have the leaders of the REA, the arsonists themselves, and that would be that. No more

fires, no more threat to innocent families living at the base of a tinder-dry hillside. No more danger to LA firefighters. Alex moved slowly. The occupants of the car were bound to be dangerous. Capable of anything. He circled his fingers tightly around his gun as he made a cautious approach to the driver's side.

About that time, the driver rolled down her window, and Alex aimed the flashlight at her. She was a freckled redhead with blue eyes and an innocent smile. Seventeen, eighteen tops. She squinted against the glare of the light. "Was I speeding?"

Alex's breathing was jagged, his body ready for a fight that was never going to materialize. He straightened and removed his hand from his gun, willing his heartbeat to slow down. He lowered the flashlight a little and thought as quickly as he could. "Your speed was okay." He was scrambling, trying to save face. "But you were weaving between lanes." He crossed his arms, hoping she couldn't tell how awkward he felt. "This one's just a warning."

"Really?" She looked genuinely surprised. "That's so nice of you. I have to pay for my own insurance if I get a ticket." She peered out the windshield. "My parents warned me about the Santa Ana winds, how it's hard to keep control of the car when it's this windy. But I didn't realize I was weaving — "

"Drive safely." Alex was already backing away. He didn't have time to visit.

"I will." She gave him a weak smile, waved once, and then safely left the convenience store parking lot and reentered traffic.

Bo was waiting for him back at the car, his expression slightly bewildered, as if even he was confused by Alex's traffic stop. "I know." Alex slid behind the wheel and slammed the door of the squad car. "That was crazy." He thudded his fist against the steering wheel. He was becoming obsessed. There were more criminals on the streets than just the members of the REA. So what was he going to do? Pull over every pale green Honda Hybrid? The girl hadn't been weaving even a little. He could've gotten more information on the plates and figured out the car was licensed to a teenage girl, right? Or made a note of the vehicle and the owner's address. But pulling someone over for no reason other than the color and make of the car? More than a week after the fires had been set? If he wasn't careful, he'd become a liability to the department.

He pulled out of the parking lot and headed back to the freeway. He would be more careful next time, but still there was just one place he wanted to go, one place where he wanted to park and read the piece of paper in his pocket. He reached back and patted Bo's head. "Get some sleep, Bo ... Lie down, boy."

Bo did as he was told. Alex only had a few more hours before they'd be done

for the night, and unless he was called for backup, Bo was probably done for the shift. Alex reached the road to the Oak Canyon Estates in ten minutes and noticed a new guard station partway up the drive. Good. The developers finally took the threat of arson seriously. He drove up and introduced himself to the guard.

“Just wanted to spend a little time looking for anything suspicious,” he told the man.

“Thank you.” The guy was older, retired maybe. He looked alert and concerned. “The extra patrol up here can only help.”

Alex agreed. He flipped a U-turn around the guard shack, drove back down to the base of the road, and parked his squad car facing the main street. That way he could get a good look at any vehicle that might come up this way at such a late hour.

The wind had let up a little, but it still howled through the canyon. Alex killed his engine and took the piece of paper from his back pocket. Before he opened it, he stared at the dark, empty road ahead of him, and the flickering lights from the neighborhood at the base of the hill. He shouldn't be here on the West Coast, working as an officer in LA. If life had gone as planned, by now he would've been moving his way up in the FDNY, maybe even working at the same station as his father.

His wonderful, brave dad.

Alex swallowed back the sorrow that suddenly surrounded him. Memories rushed at him, and he was six years old again, sitting in the front row of Mrs. England's kindergarten class, and there was his dad, standing at the front of the class next to the American flag, decked out in his firefighter uniform, talking to the kids about fire safety. And Alex was the proudest kid at Franklin Elementary School.

All he ever wanted in life was to be as good and right and true as his dad, so that people might say, “Alex Brady is doing his father's memory proud, a real good guy just like his dad.”

He and his dad would've worked together and fished together, and one day when Alex married Holly, his dad would've stood beside him, his best man. The best man Alex ever knew.

No one understood what he'd lost on 9/11, because the loss had been so great for everyone, the numbers so vast. With hundreds of firefighters dead, there was no way to take a look at each one and let the world know what sort of person had fallen victim to the terrorists. Alex narrowed his eyes. Maybe

that's what made the loss even greater. The country hadn't only lost four hundred firefighters and police officers. It had lost four hundred heroes. Four hundred heroes like his dad.

He pursed his lips and let his cheeks fill up with the air from his lungs. As he released it, he forced himself to find the strength to read the journal entry. Whatever it said, the words were sort of a final message from his father. That's why he couldn't wait another day to read it — not when any day on the job might be his last.

The car was too dark, so he flipped on the overhead light and opened the folded sheet. At the top of the page was the journal date — August 7, 2001. Alex tried to remember what he must've been doing that day. It would've still been summer break, and he would've been at football practice, maybe ... or swimming at the city pool a few blocks from their home in Staten Island. Alex steadied himself and started at the beginning.

Sometimes I come across someone in the department who personifies courage and commitment, the sort of firefighter people talk about with words like bravery and loyalty, strength and honor. That's the way I feel about my friend Ben Brady from the station a few blocks from mine.

Alex read the description of his dad once more. Brave and loyal, strong and full of honor. They were words Alex could've written. He blinked back the dampness in his eyes and continued.

We worked a call together yesterday, and I found myself watching him, the way he took charge of the blaze and set an example for the other men from his firehouse. Ben and I know each other. We've talked a number of times. But yesterday we talked on a deeper level, about what drives us. I wasn't surprised when he told me he was a Christian.

Guilt stabbed at Alex. His father had shared his faith as easily as he lived it out. Alex liked to think that somewhere in heaven his dad was proud of his police work, proud that Alex was his son. But what would his dad think about the fact that Alex had walked away from God? Alex pushed the question from his mind and found his place again.

"I take God with me on every call," he said. I liked that. It's the way I feel, the way I live. But I guess I never heard it put that way before. He said something else too. He told me he knows he can only do so much to keep the city of New York safe from fires. "When you live with constant danger," he told me, "you have to remember John 16:33." He winked at me. "That's what keeps me sane. John 16:33." I was familiar with the verse, so I understood.

Jesus used that part of Scripture to tell his friends a simple, profound message: "In me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." He also told me he hoped one day his son would embrace the verse.

The knife in Alex's conscience went a little deeper. He knew his dad thought about him often, but at work? The fact that his father had talked to another firefighter about his hopes for Alex somehow made his loss even more real. How important the Bible verse must've been to his dad, for him to talk about it with Jake Bryan. Tears burned in his eyes, but he held them off and kept reading the things his father had told Jake.

"So far, my family has had very little trouble. Life is good, love is sweet, and time seems like it'll last forever." His eyes held a bittersweet shine. "We all know that isn't true. Especially working for the FDNY."

His words stayed with me all day and even now, as I write, I can hear them in my heart. He's right. Today is like that for me and Jamie and Sierra too. Life is good, love is sweet, and time seems like it'll last forever. But it won't. It never does. And so we stay strong in the hope of John 16:33 ... because in the end, Christ has overcome the world. That's what I have to tell myself every now and then.

Every now and then.

That was about how often people thought about September 11 anymore. Once in a while, every now and then when an anniversary came along or someone mentioned Ground Zero. Alex allowed himself to focus on his father's words, the thoughts that really did form his final message to all of them. His dad had described their life before 9/11 perfectly.

Alex set the piece of paper down on the seat beside him and stared into the darkness again. Life had been so good ... love, beyond sweet ... and there had been no signs that time as they knew it was about to stop forever. Alex sat unmoving for a few minutes, remembering how great life had been, but gradually a thought came into view, something he hadn't considered before.

His dad had known the life they were living wouldn't last, that by working for the FDNY there was always a chance he could report to the station one day and not come home. But the fact hadn't made his father bitter or driven to conquer every fire in his way; it hadn't made him angry or determined to live cut off from the people who loved him.

Alex picked up the piece of paper and read it again straight through. No, the knowledge of danger and darkness in the world around him only made his

father more keenly aware of the truth about life and love and time. And the way he'd kept his focus was not through some fierce determination of his own doing, but through his faith in God, his belief in the Bible. He believed that trouble was a certainty in this world, but he was not to worry because God had already conquered the evil in this world.

The wind had dropped off considerably, and Alex rolled down his window, welcoming the fresh air. No matter what his father wished, Alex didn't think he could embrace God again. But there was something about his dad's faith that pounded at him, pushed him, and made him uncomfortable in his own skin. The talk with Clay earlier tonight came back again. What was that Scripture he'd talked about? There was a way that seemed right for a man, but in the end it would lead only to death, right? Wasn't that it?

More than that, the main thing he remembered from Clay's talk was the part about evil, and how Christ never intended for people to rid the world of all bad things, but for people to deal with the evil inside themselves. Alex tried to breathe, but his chest felt tight. It reminded him of a time when he was doing the bench press at headquarters, running through a few sets alone, without a spotter. Something had him frustrated that day, a drug bust gone awry, maybe. Whatever it was, he piled too much weight on the bar and, as he lowered it, he knew he was in trouble. He was able to hold the bar just high enough off his chest to keep it from crushing him, but he couldn't move it, couldn't get out from beneath it without calling for help.

That's how he felt now.

In the weight room that day, Joe Reynolds must've heard him shout, because he ran in and together they got the bar up and back on the rack. But who could help him now? And what about the evil in his own heart? At first the idea had seemed insane — he was one of the good guys! — but now that he'd had some time to think about it, maybe Clay was right.

He wasn't all good on the inside. What about the way he'd treated his mother, barely calling her and writing her off because she'd remarried? In the back Bo yawned and shifted to a different position. Alex looked back at his dog. He'd treated Bo better than he'd treated the people in his life, so what else could that be but a show of evil?

A car drove past, but it didn't hesitate at the winding dirt road. Alex closed his eyes, and he could see Holly exactly as she looked that day at his house when he sent her away. Her long blonde hair and deep blue eyes, the way they clouded with pain when he told her it was over, that he couldn't love her and that she needed to move on without him.

He blinked and stared at the road again. It was too late for him to make it right

with Holly. Too late for any of the buddies he'd left behind. But it wasn't too late for his mother. The phone calls they shared always came from her, and every time he made the conversation brief and strained, with short answers and a sense that he had something pressing he needed to get back to doing.

The piece of paper was still in his hand, and he studied it one more time. His father would've been appalled at the way he'd lost touch with everyone — but especially with his mom. Why hadn't he thought about that before? Again, the pressure built in his chest and he had the sudden feeling that the canyon walls around him were closing in, threatening to crush him.

He looked at the time on his iPhone. It wouldn't be quite five in the morning in New York City, but it no longer mattered. Alex couldn't wait another minute to tell his mom what he should've told her years ago. What he should've told her September 12, 2001.

He found her number and tapped it once. It connected immediately, and on the fourth ring — just when Alex was chiding himself for calling so early — she picked up. "Hello?" her voice was frantic. "Alex? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm fine." He pressed his fingers to his brow. He should've waited until morning. Any mother of a police officer would be terrified of a call at this hour.

"Alex ..." she let go a rush of air. "You scared me. It's five in the morning."

He wasn't sure where to start. "I owe you an apology."

"Son?" she hesitated, calmer now, still trying to catch her breath.

He sighed. "I don't know if I can put it into words." He would tell her the whole story someday, the next time they were together. He held his breath, pressing through the moment. "I ... I haven't been the same since Dad died, and ... well, I'm sorry. That's all. I just want you to know I'm sorry."

She must've been too surprised to speak because it took her several seconds to respond. "Alex, what ... what happened?"

"I don't know." He anchored his elbow on his open window and rested his head in his hand. "It's a long story." His eyes felt damp again. "I couldn't wait another hour to make this call." Alex waited, but there was silence on the other end. He thought maybe they'd lost connection, but then he heard the soft sound of sniffing over the phone line. "Mom ... don't be sad ... it's all my fault. I can't live like this anymore, pushing everyone away." He paused, his sorrow suffocating him. "Dad would've hated what I've become." He set the piece of paper on the seat beside him again and grabbed the steering wheel. "Can you forgive me?"

“Yes.” She sniffed again, although clearly she was trying to hide the fact that she was crying. “I’ve prayed for this ever since you left.”

Alex wasn’t sure what to say to that, but something felt different in his heart, the same tenderness he’d felt for the crazy old lady with the imaginary soldiers in her backyard. This time the feeling was almost a welcome one. He squeezed his eyes shut to keep from crying. “I love you, Mom. I do.”

“I love you too.” Her voice cracked and she couldn’t hide her tears.

“Okay, then.” Alex’s throat felt thick. “Go back to sleep. I’ll call you later.”

As the call ended, Alex sat back and inhaled fully. He could breathe again, and he took stock of the condition of his heart. On this windy Wednesday night, he had rid the world of one more bad guy, and he’d guarded a development and a neighborhood from the terrorist attacks of the REA. Okay, so what? He couldn’t sit up here every night. Besides, the world was no different now than it had been when he woke up. There was no less evil around him.

But he’d told his mother he loved her, and as a result there was less evil inside him.

And that — more than any crime solving — would’ve truly made his dad proud.

Hoofstuk 22

Alex kan nie wag vir die kans om af te trek en die stukkie papier in sy sak te lees nie, maar daar is net een plek waar hy gewillig is om op ’n winderige aand soos vanaand te parkeer: Die pad wat na Oak Canyon Estates lei. Hy weier om te dink aan wat Clay gesê het of die nuus oor die polisieman of oor die jaagtog van vroeër wat hom amper sy lewe gekos het. Hy hou eenvoudig sy oë op die pad en een hand op die stuurwiel. Met die ander hand vryf hy vir Bo. Die hond is op sy hoede en hy kan aanvoel dat iets fout is met Alex.

“Dis oukei, Bo ... moenie bekommerd wees nie, my hond, alles is oukei.” Hy sê die woorde oor en oor, maar dit klink glad nie oortuigend nie. Hy is nie oukei nie, glad nie. Dit voel of sy siel besig is om uit te rafel. Sedert 11 September het hy nog nooit so hard daaraan gewerk om geen gevoelens te hê nie. Vir jare gaan hy nou al deur die lewe en weier sy diepste emosies, gedryf deur een doelwit. Maar nou kry sy hart seer van alles wat hy probeer wegstoot. Hy kyk na die horlosie op die motor se paneelbord. Sy skof eindig om drie-uur die oggend; dus het hy nog ’n paar uur oor. Hy ry effens vinniger, sien al in sy geestesoog die plek waar hy gaan parkeer om die

joernaalinskrywing te lees.

Dan gebeur dit.

Voor hom klim 'n groen Honda van die deurpad af en neem die afrit net voor Las Virgenes-weg. Dit is dieselfde tipe motor wat ooggetuies verlede week die brandstigingstoneel sien verlaat het. Terwyl hy die motor agtervolg, gaan Alex die nommerplate na. Die soektog lewer niks op nie, maar dit maak nie saak nie. Die brandstiger van die ROA is nog nie gevang nie, so natuurlik is daar nie 'n lasbrief vir die man nie. Aan die onderkant van die uitgang skakel Alex sy motor se ligte aan. Hy verwag dat die motor gaan wegjaag; daarom verras dit hom toe die motorbestuurder stadiger ry, die flikkerlig aanskakel en veilig van bane verwissel voordat hy die parkeerarea van 'n 7-Eleven binnery. Alex los Bo vir eers in die motor. Toe hy na die motor toe loop, hou hy sy een hand op sy geweer en 'n flitslig in die ander. Die wind waai teen sy gesig. Vir die tweede keer daardie dag skop die adrenalien in. Dit is waarvoor hy gewag het. Die mense in die motor is duidelik op pad om nog 'n brand te gaan stig, maar hy gaan hulle vang voordat hulle dit kan doen. Binne 'n paar minute sal hy die leiers van die ROA, die brandstigers self, gevang hê, so maklik soos dit. Geen brande, geen gevaar vir die onskuldige gesinne wat teen die voet van die heuwel met kurkdroë grasvelde bly nie. Geen gevaar vir Los Angeles se brandweermanne nie. Alex beweeg stadig. Die mense in die motor is definitief gevaarlik. Tot enigiets in staat. Hy vou sy vingers styf om sy geweer terwyl hy versigtig na die bestuurder se kant toe loop.

Op daardie oomblik rol die bestuurder haar venster af en Alex skyn met die flitslig op haar. Dit is 'n jong rooikopvrou met sproete, blou oë en 'n onskuldige glimlag. Sewentien, dalk agtien jaar oud. Sy trek haar oë op skrefies teen die lig. "Het ek te vinnig gery?"

Alex se asem jaag, sy liggaam is gereed vir 'n geveg wat nooit gaan gebeur nie. Hy staan regop en haal sy hand van sy geweer af, laat sy hart toe om stadiger te klop. Hy laat sak die flitslig effens en dink so vinnig as wat hy kan. "Jy het nie te vinnig gery nie." Hy gryp na woorde, probeer sy aansien red. "Maar jy het tussen die bane deur geveg." Hy vou sy arms, hoop nie sy kan sien hoe ongemaklik hy voel nie. "Dit is net 'n waarskuwing."

"Regtig?" Sy lyk werklik verras. "Dit is so gaaf van jou. Ek moet self betaal as ek 'n kaartjie kry." Sy kyk by die voorruit uit. "My ouers het my gewaarsku oor die Santa Ana-winde, hoe dit moeilik is om jou motor te beheer wanneer dit winderig is. Maar ek het nie besef dat ek deur die bane – "

"Bestuur versigtig." Alex is reeds besig om terug te tree. Hy het nie tyd om te kuier nie.

"Ek sal." Sy glimlag halfhartig, waai een keer, en verlaat die parkeerarea versigtig tot sy weer in die verkeer is.

Bo wag vir hom in die motor, sy uitdrukking effens verward, asof hy nie verstaan hoekom Alex iemand afgetrek het nie. "Ja, ek weet." Alex klim agter die stuurwiel in en maak die motordeur toe. "Dit was malligheid." Hy slaan met sy vuus teen die stuurwiel. Hy is besig om obsessief te raak. Daar is meer

misdadigers op straat as net lede van die ROA. So wat gaan hy doen? Elke liewe groen Honda Hybrid aftrek? Die meisie het glad nie eers deur die verkeer geveg nie. Hy kon die nommerplate gebruik het om meer inligting te kry en gesien het dat dit aan 'n tienermeisie behoort, nie waar nie? Of 'n nota van die motor en die eienaar se adres gemaak het. Maar om iemand sonder rede af te trek net oor die kleur en maak van die motor? Meer as 'n week nadat die brande gestig is? As hy nie oppas is nie, gaan hy 'n las word vir die polisie.

Hy verlaat die parkeerarea en ry terug na die deurpad. Hy sal volgende keer versigtiger wees. Maar steeds is daar net een plek waarheen hy wil gaan, een plek waar hy wil gaan parkeer en die stukkie papier in sy sak wil lees. Hy leun terug en vryf Bo se kop. "Slaap 'n bietjie, Bo. Lê maar, my hond."

Bo maak presies soos hy beveel word. Daar is net 'n paar uur van Alex se skof oor, en tensy hy vir bystand uitgeroep word, is Bo se skof waarskynlik verby. Alex is binne tien minute by die pad wat na Oak Canyon Estates lei en sien daar is 'n nuwe sekuriteitstasie halfpad teen die heuwel opgerig. Goed so. Die ontwikkelaars het uiteindelik die dreigement van brandstigting ernstig opgeneem. Hy ry soontoe en stel homself aan die wag voor.

"Ek wil maar net 'n bietjie tyd hier deurbring en kyk of ek nie enigiets verdag sien nie," sê hy vir die man.

"Dankie." Dit is 'n ouerige man, miskien afgetree. Hy lyk op sy hoede en bekommerd. "Dit kan net help as hier iemand ekstra is wat patroleer."

Alex stem saam. Hy maak 'n U-draai om die wag se huisie, ry tot aan die onderkant van die pad en parkeer sy polisiemotor met sy neus na die hoofstraat. Op hierdie manier kan hy elke motor dophou wat so laat in hierdie rigting kom.

Die wind het nou effens gaan lê, maar dit suis steeds deur die canyon. Alex skakel sy motor af en haal die stukkie papier uit sy sak. Voordat hy dit oopmaak, staar hy die donkerte in, na die leë pad voor hom en die flikkerende liggies van die woonbuurt teen die voet van die heuwel. Hy moenie hier aan die Weskus wees en as polisieman in Los Angeles werk nie. As die lewe geloop het soos hy beplan het, sou hy al goed gevestig gewees het as brandweerman in New York, en miskien selfs by dieselfde brandweerstasie as sy pa gewerk het.

Sy wonderlike, dapper pa.

Alex sluk die hartseer terug wat hom skielik omvou. Herinneringe spoel oor hom, en hy is weer ses jaar oud. Hy sit in die voorste ry van mevrou England se kleuterskoolklas, en sy pa staan langs die Amerikaanse vlag met sy uniform aan, en praat met die kinders oor veiligheid wanneer dit by vuur kom. En Alex is die trotsste kind in die skool.

Al wat hy in die lewe wou hê, was om so goed en regverdig en opreg soos sy pa te wees sodat mense sal sê: "Alex Brady doen sy pa se herinnering eer aan. Hy is waarlik 'n goeie man, net soos sy pa."

Hy en sy pa sou saam gewerk het en saam visgevang het, en eendag as Alex

met Holly trou, sou sy pa langs hom gestaan het as strooijonker. Die beste man wat Alex ooit geken het.

Niemand verstaan wat hy op 11 September verloor het nie, want die verlies was vir almal so groot, en die aantal sterftes so baie. Met honderde brandweermanne wat gesterf het, was daar geen manier om na elkeen te kyk en vir die wêreld te vertel watter tipe persoon die slagoffer van die terroriste geword het nie. Alex trek sy oë op skrefies. Miskien is dit wat die verlies selfs groter gemaak het. Die land het nie net vierhonderd brandweermanne en polisiemanne verloor nie, maar vierhonderd helde. Vierhonderd helde soos sy pa.

Hy pers sy lippe op mekaar en vul sy wange met lug uit sy longe. Toe hy uitasem, dwing hy homself om moed bymekaar te skraap om die joernaal te lees. Wat ook al daarin staan, die woorde is amper soos 'n finale boodskap van sy pa. Dit is hoekom hy nie nog 'n dag langer kon wag om dit te lees nie – nie wanneer enige dag by die werk sy laaste kan wees nie.

Die motor is te donker; daarom skakel hy die dakliggie aan en vou die papier oop. Bo aan die bladsy staan die datum: 7 Augustus 2001. Alex probeer onthou wat hy daardie dag gedoen het. Dit moes nog somervakansie gewees het en hy was miskien by die voetbaloefening ... of by die openbare swembad 'n paar blokke van hulle huis in Staten Island. Alex sit regop en begin lees.

Soms loop ek iemand by die brandweer raak wat 'n toonbeeld van dapperheid en toewyding is, die soort brandweerman waaroor mense praat en met woorde soos “dapper” en “lojaal”, “krag” en “aansien” beskryf. Dit is hoe ek oor my vriend Ben Brady voel, wat by 'n brandweerstasie 'n paar blokke van myne werk.

Alex lees weer die beskrywing van sy pa. Dapper en lojaal, sterk en vol waardigheid. Dit kon netsowel woorde wees wat Alex geskryf het. Hy knip sy oë teen die trane en lees verder.

Ons is gister saam uitgeroep en ek het skielik stilgestaan en na hom gekyk, hoe hy beheer geneem het oor die vuur en 'n voorbeeld gestel het vir die manne van sy brandweerstasie. Ek en Ben ken mekaar. Ons het al 'n paar keer gepraat. Maar gister het ons oor dieper dinge met mekaar gepraat, oor wat die dryfkrag agter ons is. Dit het my nie verras toe ek hoor hy is 'n Christen nie.

'n Skuldgevoel steek soos 'n mes in Alex. Sy pa het sy geloof met ander gedeel net so maklik soos hy dit uitgeleef het. Alex hoop dat sy pa daar êrens in die hemel trots is op sy polisiewerk, trots dat Alex sy seun is. Maar wat sal sy pa dink oor die feit dat Alex sy rug op God gedraai het? Alex ignoreer die vraag en kry weer die plek waarvandaan hy verder moet lees.

“Ek vat God elke keer saam met my wanneer ons uitgeroep word,” het hy gesê. Ek hou daarvan. Dit is ook hoe ek voel, hoe ek leef. Maar ek veronderstel ek het nog nooit gehoor dat iemand dit so stel nie. Hy het ook

iets anders gesê. Hy het vir my gesê hy weet hy kan net soveel doen om New York teen brande te beskerm. “Wanneer jy konstant met gevaar saamleef, moet jy Johannes 16:33 onthou,” het hy gesê. Hy het vir my geknippoog. “Hierdie teksvers help my om nie my varkies te verloor nie.” Ek ken die vers; daarom het ek verstaan. Jesus het die Skrifgedeelte gebruik om vir sy vriende ’n eenvoudige, diepgrondige boodskap oor te dra: “Ek sê hierdie dinge vir julle sodat julle in My rus en vrede kan vind. In hierdie wêreld sal julle swaarkry beleef, maar skep moed: Ek het die wêreld reeds oorwin.” Hy het ook vir my gesê hy hoop sy seun aanvaar ook eendag hierdie vers.

Die mes in Alex se gewete steek ’n bietjie dieper. Hy weet sy pa het dikwels aan hom gedink, maar by die werk? Die feit dat sy pa met ’n ander brandweerman oor sy drome vir Alex gepraat het, maak die verlies ’n groter werklikheid. Hoe belangrik moes die Bybelvers nie vir sy pa gewees het nie, dat hy met Jake Bryan daaroor gepraat het. Die trane brand in sy oë, maar hy knip dit weg en lees verder wat sy pa vir Jake vertel het.

“My gesin het sover maar min swaarkry beleef. Die lewe is goed, die liefde wonderlik, en dit lyk of tyd vir ewig sal aanhou.” Daar was ’n bittersoet glans in sy oë. “Ons almal weet dit is nie waar nie. Veral as jy vir die brandweer werk.”

Sy woorde het die hele dag by my gebly en selfs nou, terwyl ek skryf, weerklink dit in my hart. Hy is reg. Dit is hoe vandag vir my en Jamie en Sierra voel. Die lewe is goed, die liefde wonderlik, en dit lyk of tyd vir ewig sal aanhou. Maar dit gaan nie. Dit is van korte duur. Dus bly ons sterk deur aan Johannes 16:33 vas te hou ... want God het die wêreld reeds oorwin. Ek moet myself so nou en dan daaraan herinner.

So nou en dan.

Dit is omtrent hoe gereeld mense deesdae oor 11 September dink. So nou en dan wanneer dit ’n herdenking is of iemand oor Ground Zero praat. Alex fokus op sy pa se woorde, die gedagtes wat werklik sy laaste boodskap aan hulle almal is. Sy pa het hulle lewe voor 11 September perfek beskryf.

Alex sit die stukkie papier op die sitplek langs hom neer en staar die donkerte in. Die lewe was so goed ... die liefde nog beter. En daar was geen tekens dat die lewe soos hulle dit geken het, vir altyd sou verander nie. Alex sit vir ’n paar minute doodstil en onthou hoe lekker die lewe was. Maar dan dink hy aan iets waaraan hy nooit vantevore gedink het nie.

Sy pa het geweet die lewe soos hulle dit geken het, sou nie vir altyd aanhou nie, dat wanneer jy vir die brandweer werk daar altyd ’n kans is dat jy eendag by die stasie kan opdaag en nie weer teruggaan huis toe nie. Maar dit het nie sy pa bitter gemaak of vasberade om ’n lewe te leef afgesonder van die mense wat vir hom lief was nie.

Alex tel die stukkie papier op en lees dit weer ’n keer deur. Nee, die feit dat sy pa geweet het daar is gevaar en boosheid in die wêreld om hom, het hom net

meer bewus gemaak van die waarheid oor die lewe en liefde en tyd. En die manier hoe hy fokus behou het, was nie as gevolg van vurige vasberadenheid uit homself nie, maar deur sy geloof in God, sy geloof in die Bybel. Hy het geglo moeilikheid is 'n werklikheid in hierdie wêreld, maar dat hy hom nie daarvoor hoef te bekommer nie, want God het alreeds die boosheid oorwin.

Die wind het aansienlik bedaar en Alex draai sy venster af, verwelkom die vars lug. Maak nie saak wat sy pa se wens was nie, Alex dink nie hy kan homself weer na God draai nie. Maar daar is iets omtrent sy pa se geloof wat hom bly pla, aan hom bly karring, en hom ongemaklik laat voel. Hy dink weer aan die gesprek met Clay vroeër vanaand. Wat was die teksvers waaroor hy gepraat het? Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; agterna kom dit uit dat dit na die dood gelei het, nie waar nie? Was dit wat daar staan?

Wat hy eintlik van Clay se gesprek onthou, is die deel oor boosheid, en hoe Christus nooit bedoel het dat mense die wêreld van alle slegte dinge moet red nie, maar dat 'n mens met die boosheid in jouself moet afreken. Alex probeer asemhaal, maar dit voel of iets op sy bors druk. Dit herinner hom aan die tyd toe hy gewigte opgetel het by die hoofkantoor, toe hy 'n paar stelle alleen gedoen het sonder iemand om met die gewigte te help. Hy was gefrustreerd daardie dag, oor 'n dwelmsoektog wat verkeerd geloop het of iets. Wat dit ook al was, hy het te veel gewigte op die staaf gelaai, en toe hy dit na sy bors laat sak, het hy geweet hy is in die moeilikheid. Hy kon die gewigte net bo sy bors hou om te keer dat dit op hom val, maar hy kon dit nie beweeg nie, kon nie onder dit wegkom sonder om om hulp te roep nie.

Dit is hoe hy nou voel.

Joe Reynolds moes hom daardie dag in die gewigkamer hoor skree het, want hy het ingehardloop en saam het hulle die gewigte opgetel en teruggesit op die staander. Maar wie kan hom nou help? En wat van die boosheid in sy eie hart? Eers het dit na 'n mal idee geklink – hy is mos een van die goeie ouens. Maar noudat hy daarvoor nadink, is Clay miskien reg.

Hy was nie net goed aan die binnekant nie. Wat van die manier hoe hy sy ma behandel, die feit dat hy byna nooit bel of skryf omdat sy weer getrou het nie? Agter hom gaap Bo en skuif rond. Alex kyk na sy hond. Hy behandel Bo beter as wat hy die mense in sy lewe behandel, so wat anders kan dit wees as 'n teken van boosheid?

'n Motor ry verby, maar dit ry nie stadiger toe dit die kronkelende grondpad bereik nie. Alex maak sy oë toe, en hy kan vir Holly sien presies soos sy daardie dag by sy huis gelyk het toe hy haar weggejaag het. Haar lang blonde hare en diepblou oë, hoe dit gewys het hoe seergemaak sy voel toe hy vir haar gesê het dit is verby, dat hy nie vir haar lief kan wees nie en dat sy sonder hom moet aanbeweeg.

Hy knip sy oë en staar weer na die pad. Dit is te laat om dinge met Holly reg te maak. Te laat vir enige van die vriende wat hy agtergelaat het. Maar dit is nie te laat vir sy ma nie. Wanneer hulle oor die telefoon praat, is dit altyd sy wat die oproep gemaak het, en elke keer het hy hulle gesprekke kort en

kragtig gehou, met kort antwoorde en die gevoel dat daar iets is wat hy moet gaan doen.

Dit stukkie papier is steeds in sy hand, en hy kyk weer daarna. Sy pa sou ontsteld gewees het oor die feit dat hy kontak verloor het met almal – maar veral met sy ma. Hoekom het hy nog nooit daaraan gedink nie? Weereens bou die druk in sy bors op en hy voel skielik hoe die canyon se mure al hoe naderkom, dreig om hom dood te druk.

Hy gebruik sy selfoon om te kyk hoe laat dit is. Dit is nog nie vyfuur die oggend in New York nie, maar dit maak nie meer saak nie. Alex kan nie langer wag om vir sy ma te sê wat hy al jare terug moes gesê het nie. Wat hy op 12 September 2001 vir haar moes gesê het nie.

Hy soek haar nommer en druk daarop. Dit lui dadelik en toe dit vir die vierde keer lui – net toe Alex homself oor die vingers tik omdat hy so vroeg bel – antwoord sy. “Hallo?” haar stem klink verwilderd. “Alex? Is alles oukei?”

“Ja, Ma, ek is oukei.” Hy druk met sy vingers op sy voorkop. Hy moes gewag het tot later. Enige ma van ’n polisieman sal geskok wees om hierdie tyd van die oggend ’n oproep te ontvang.

“Alex ... ” sy blaas haar asem uit. “Jy het my laat skrik. Dis vyfuur in die oggend.”

Hy is nie seker waar om te begin nie. “Ek skuld Ma ’n verskoning.”

“My seun?” sy aarsel, rustiger nou, probeer steeds om stadiger asem te haal.

Hy sug. “Ek weet nie of ek dit in woorde kan uitdruk nie.” Hy sal eendag vir haar die hele storie vertel, wanneer hulle mekaar weer sien. Hy hou sy asem op, sukkel om te begin. “Ek ... ek is nie dieselfde sedert Pa se dood nie, en ... wel, ek is jammer. Dit is al. Ek wil net hê Ma moet weet ek is jammer.”

Sy is seker te verras om te praat, want dit neem haar ’n paar sekondes om te antwoord. “Alex, wat ... wat het gebeur?”

“Ek weet nie.” Hy rus met sy elmboog op die oop venster en rus met sy kop in sy hand. “Dis ’n lang storie.” Sy oë voel weer effens nat. “Maar ek kon nie nog ’n minuut langer wag om hierdie oproep te maak nie.” Alex wag, maar dit is stil aan die ander kant. Hy dink hulle is miskien afgesny, maar dan hoor hy sagte snuifgeluide oor die telefoon. “Ma ... moenie huil nie ... dit is alles my skuld. Ek kan nie meer so leef nie. Ek stoot almal weg.” Hy bly ’n oomblik stil. Dit voel of sy hartseer hom versmoor. “Pa sou dit gehaat het om die mens te sien wat ek geword het.” Hy sit die stukkie papier weer op die sitplek langs hom neer en gryp die stuurwiel vas. “Sal Ma my kan vergewe?”

“Ja.” Sy snuif weer, hoewel dit duidelik is dat sy haar hartseer probeer wegsteek. “Ek het hiervoor gebid vandat jy hier weg is.”

Alex weet nie wat om te sê nie, maar iets voel anders in sy hart, dieselfde sagtheid wat hy gevoel het vir daardie mal ou vrou met die denkbeeldige soldate in haar agterplaas. Hierdie keer is dit asof hy die gevoel verwelkom. Hy knyp sy oë toe om nie te huil nie. “Ek is lief vir Ma. Regtig.”

“Ek is lief vir jou ook.” Sy kan dit nie langer wegsteek nie en begin huil.

“Goed dan.” Alex het ’n knop in sy keel. “Gaan slaap weer. Ek sal Ma later

weer bel.”

Alex sit terug en asem diep in. Hy kan weer asemhaal en hy dink na oor wat in sy hart aangaan. Op hierdie winderige Woensdagaand het hy die wêreld van nog 'n skurk gered, en 'n ontwikkeling en 'n woonbuurt teen aanvalle van die ROA beskerm. Wat nou? Hy kan nie elke aand hier sit nie. En die wêreld is nou tog ook nie anders as toe hy vanoggend opgestaan het nie. Daar is nie minder boosheid om hom nie.

Maar hy het vir sy ma gesê hy is lief vir haar; daarom is daar nou minder boosheid in hom. En dit, meer as enige misdaadbestryding, sou sy pa werklik trots maak het.

TWENTY-THREE

Owl felt sick to his stomach. Only one thing could explain his nervousness tonight — the same thing he'd been feeling for the past month. He was having second thoughts. He paced along the front window of the rented house at the base of the foothills. The winds had died down last night, but now it was just past midnight and they were back with a vengeance. The decision was made.

It was Thursday night and the winds were in full force, same as yesterday. But an hour ago the orders had been given by Leo. This was the night the Oak Canyon Estates was going down.

“Listen to this.” Steve Simons adjusted his glasses and grabbed a piece of paper off the printer. People thought Steve was the leader among the three of them, but they were wrong. Leo was in control. All three-dozen members of the REA answered to him, and it was Leo who ran the show a few weeks ago when he and Steve masqueraded as brothers and cased Oak Canyon Estates the first time.

A single light reflected off Steve's bald head as he held up the printed document. “We're leaving this at the guard station. If it survives the fire, great. If not, we'll send a copy to the paper.” He sat on the edge of the table at the center of the living room. None of them lived here, but they spent more time here than anywhere else. The mission was that demanding.

“Hurry up.” Leo was sunk into the sofa along the back wall. Owl tried not to cower. Sometimes he wasn't sure how he got mixed up with Steve and Leo. Somewhere along the way the ideals Owl prided himself in keeping had distorted so that property, possessions, even people took a lesser role than the environment. But at this point he was committed. He knew too much to back out, and Leo was just psycho enough to kill him if he tried.

Leo waved his hand at Steve. “We need to get on the road. The winds are perfect.”

Steve stared at the paper. “We, the members of the REA, committed this act of civil disobedience fully aware of the damage it might exact. In doing so, we take a public stand against the wasteful practices of our society and the

materialism that drives industries such as the luxury housing market. Hillsides are better off left alone, in the pristine condition that is their inherent and unerring right. Better to burn the blight of increasing gluttonous materialism now, than to allow it to encroach unchecked into the hills surrounding our city, where continued excess will add to global warming and the demise of our planet. We make a call to all people to reduce, recycle, and respond to the mandate of environmentalism. This is a global war. We stand by our decision. Officially, the REA.”

“Perfect.” Leo’s voice was dry. He stood and slipped his hands into his pockets. “Let’s go.”

Owl was still looking at Steve, thinking about the letter. “You didn’t mention natural resources ... you know, the limited natural resources and how the wasteful habits of overindulgent people are leading to a critical reduction in natural resources whenever – “

“Shut up.” Leo walked over to Owl and leaned in close. His breath reeked of stale onions and fresh Diet Coke. He turned to Steve. “The letter’s fine. We’re out of here.”

Owl didn’t dare say anything else. After the whole Danny thing, he sort of hoped the guys would kick him out. He wasn’t sure how else he could break ties with them now — when he knew so much. His hands shook as he headed for the door. Both Steven and Leo smelled a rat after the meeting with Danny — never mind that the guy said the right things. Leo even thought he might be a cop, of all things. Then there were those detectives sniffing around after the last fire. Owl shuddered and grabbed his bag. If he’d let a cop in on their activities, the guys would kill him and toss his body over a canyon somewhere. Leo, for sure, wouldn’t have hesitated to take him out.

“Got everything?” Steve drilled a look at him. They’d been over this a number of times. It wasn’t like this was the first fire they’d ever set. But it would definitely be the biggest. Especially with the winds like they were tonight.

Owl definitely wanted to throw up. He thought a moment. The kerosene was in the trunk. He had a dozen rags, six oversized barbecue lighters, and a map of the fire roads around the Oak Canyon Estates — in case they couldn’t exit by the gravel road. He nodded at Steve. “Got it.”

“What about the gun?” Steve looked at Leo.

“Do you have to ask?” Leo rolled his eyes. “I’ve got two. Now come on. A couple of our other guys are starting fires tonight. We want to be first.”

Owl’s teeth began to chatter. He clenched his jaw and made his way to the car

before the others. In the beginning he agreed with everything the REA stood for. But now ... now they seemed a million miles from their goals of protecting the environment. Like the whole setting fires thing had become an obsession, not a means to an end. Owl took a spot in the backseat. Steve had traded in the green Honda after it was spotted at the last job. Police never got a read on his license plate, so there were no red flags when he made the trade. And with Steve's tech salary, he could afford to trade his car whenever he wanted. Now Steve had a Toyota Prius, a hybrid that could go from city to city on fumes. Owl settled in and tried to calm his pounding heart.

Maybe once they got up there he could take off on foot over the hill and down the canyon, find a footpath or some other way out. After all, he was the firesetter tonight. Steve and Leo would help place the kerosene rags and make sure they'd get the most destruction in the least amount of time on site. But he — Owl — would light the flame.

He wondered what his friends in college would think of him now? Save the earth ... stop global warming ... back then their ideals had been so altruistic, so crucial to the survival of the planet.

But now ...

Up in the front seat Leo was barking orders to Steve, who was behind the wheel, sweat glistening off his smooth head. "Turn off your lights twenty yards before the road turns up to the estates. You remember the place, right?"

"Of course."

"Yeah, but don't forget about the lights."

Owl had heard about Steve and Leo's visit here, how they'd pretended to be a couple of brothers and businessmen on their lunch breaks. Got the whole tour and everything. Now they knew exactly where they wanted to start the fires.

"We're almost there." Leo couldn't sit still. He looked at his watch. "Timing's perfect."

"The wind too."

Five minutes later, the two of them were still talking about the perfect conditions when they approached the gravel road. The main street was empty at this hour, so Steve slowed down and turned off his headlights.

"Don't miss the turn. Take it slow. We don't need any two-bit security guard hearing us at this point." Leo hissed the words. They were only half a minute up the dark hill when he let out a sharp, "Hey! What's that?"

“Looks like a guard station.” Steve hovered over the steering wheel and peered into the windy black night. “When did they put up a guard station?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Leo pulled his gun from his pocket and cocked the trigger. “Looks like a barrier’s blocking the way on both sides.”

Owl’s heart raced. They weren’t going to shoot someone, were they? He grabbed hold of the door handle. Maybe he could jump out when the car slowed down. Jump and run for it, because Steve and Leo were crazy if they were willing to shoot a security guard.

“What’ya want me to say?” Steve slowed the vehicle.

“Don’t say anything! Drive straight through it.”

“He’ll call the police.” Frustration laced Steve’s voice. “We’ll be arrested before we light the first fire.”

“You drive. I’ll take care of it.”

Owl’s heart beat harder, faster. They never should’ve brought a gun. He bit at the cuticle on his thumb and waited, looking for his chance. If Leo shot someone, they could all go to prison for a very long time. He sank back in his seat, his eyes wide.

“There’s a guard.” Steve wasn’t slowing down. “You still want me to drive through the barrier?”

“Do it. Gun it!”

Steve did as he was told, pushing the hybrid as best he could. Just as they were about to drive through the gate, the guard stepped out to stop them. Steve almost hit him, but at the last second he swerved and took out the bar instead. The guard had a gun, but before he could fire it, Leo leaned across Steve and clicked off three quick shots.

In the craziness of the moment, Owl forgot to jump. He sat in the back, slack-jawed and stunned. What had just happened? He didn’t want to turn around and look, but he had no choice. He had to know if the bullets had hit their mark.

Up front Steve was shouting, “What’d you do that for? Did you hit him?”

“Who cares?” Leo pointed the gun straight ahead. “Let’s get this thing burning.”

That’s when Owl turned, just a quick look over his left shoulder. The road ahead was curving, but in the shadowy light from the guard station he saw a

body lying facedown on the ground. Owl felt his heart skip a few beats and then slip into a wild and crazy rhythm. Leo was insane. There was nothing in the REA guidelines that said anything about killing people. Civil disobedience, yes. Arson and vandalism, yes. But murder? His upper lip began to twitch, and he looked at the bag of rags and lighters on the floorboard.

They were going to get caught. He could feel it.



Holly hadn't worked this late in a month, but there had been a burst of activity lately. Mortgage rates had fallen, and more people must've felt confident about the economy. Whatever the reason, she had a mountain of paperwork ahead of her and back-to-back meetings tomorrow. Better to get the extra work done on a Thursday night than let it spill into the weekend. She narrowed her eyes and fought back a yawn. Ron had offered to stay and help, to take care of his own paperwork here with her.

But then his father had experienced chest pains — something that had happened twice in the last week. Ron decided it was better to take him to the emergency room and have him checked. Just in case it was something serious. Dave was worried sick about the threat of arson, and the people who might get hurt if a blaze was set.

Holly didn't blame him, but she figured if the members of the REA were going to hit Oak Canyon Estates they would've done so already. The group had certainly had its chances. For two weeks straight, Holly had avoided working here alone, but with the guard in place, she felt safer than ever before. Tonight — even with the wind — the development felt like an oasis above the Valley floor — safe and serene. The wind howled outside, rattling the windows and beating against the walls, but the forecast was for the winds to die down before morning.

Holly focused on her paperwork. The music playing from her iPod speakers was a country list, and Holly sang along to something by Carrie Underwood. The lyrics reminded her that things weren't going well with Ron. He'd cooled his advances toward her, and she hadn't really minded.

Her mother thought the two of them were being ridiculous. "It's like I told you, Holly. You have to work at love. That means two busy people need to take time from their schedules to date and talk and be together."

Holly still hadn't been able to explain to her mother that a person could only work so hard to find sparks. If they weren't there, they weren't —

Suddenly, from somewhere nearby came three loud, sharp pops — like the sound of gunfire. Holly turned down the music and sat perfectly still. She wasn't sure, but it sounded like a car was coming up the road. She glanced at the clock near the top of the computer screen. Two thirty-five. Who would be coming up the road at this hour, and what were those noises?

She picked up her radio, the one that connected her to the guard at the gate. She pressed down the speaker button. "Michael, come in ... this is Holly in the office, come in."

Static sounded on the other end, but nothing else.

"Michael, this is Holly. I heard something, and I need to know what it was." Fear raised the pitch of her voice and she fought back a wave of panic. "Come in, please."

Again there was no answer, but just then she definitely heard the sound of a car. Much closer than before. She stood quickly, rushed to the other side of the office, and flipped off the light switch. Whoever it was, she didn't want them to see her in here alone. The rest of the lights in the house were already off. Without wasting a single second, she hurried across the dark office to the phone and snatched the receiver. Her eyes still glued to the top of the gravel road, she dialed 9-1-1.

In a frantic voice, she told the operator who she was, where she worked, and that she was up at the model house in Oak Canyon Estates by herself. "I think I heard gunshots, and now someone's driving up the private road. It sounds like they're coming very fast."

The operator promised to dispatch a deputy. "Stay put, and call back if anything else happens."

As soon as Holly hung up, the car came into view. It peeled up the hill and onto the paved street. Without hesitating, the car made a sharp right turn and sped toward the far end of the street.

Holly's heart was pounding, and her mouth was dry. She hadn't been able to make out the model or color of the car, let alone a license plate. But what could the people in the car be up to? And why wasn't Michael answering at the gate? Michael should've stopped them, and if he'd run into trouble, he should've called 9-1-1. So what was happening? A gust of wind blew against the house. Were the threats coming to fruition? Were the people in the car about to set fire to the development?

She dialed 9-1-1 again, and this time she spoke in a terrified whisper. "Someone's come up the hill, driving very fast. I can't reach the guard station.

I think something very bad is about to happen.”

Not until after she hung up did she smell something strange wafting in through the one open window. It wasn't a construction smell — roofing tar or paint or carpet. Rather, this was a smell that paralyzed her with fear.

It was the smell of kerosene.

Hoofstuk 23

Uil voel skoon na van ontsteltenis. Daar is net een rede vir sy senuweeagtigheid vanaand – dieselfde rede waaroor hy vir die afgelope maand dink. Hy begin twyfel. Hy loop heen en weer voor die venster van die huurhuis teen die voet van die heuwel. Die wind het gisteraand gaan lê, maar dit is nou net ná middernag en die wind is met mening terug. Die besluit is geneem.

Dit is Donderdagaand en die wind waai verwoed, net soos gister. 'n Uur gelede het Leo die bevel uitgedeel. Vanaand is die aand wat Oak Canyon Estates vernietig gaan word.

“Luister hierna.” Steve Simons druk sy bril hoër op met sy vinger en tel die papier van die kopieerder af op. Mense dink Steve is die leier onder hulle drie, maar hulle is verkeerd. Leo is in beheer. Die drie dosyn lede van die ROA moet aan hom rapporteer, en dit is Leo wat 'n paar weke gelede in beheer was toe hy en Steve voorgegee het om broers te wees en vir die eerste keer na Oak Canyon Estates gaan kyk het.

Die lig reflekteer vanaf Steve se kaalkop toe hy die uitgedrukte dokument in die lug hou. “Ons los hierdie by die ingang. As dit die brand oorleef, goed so. Indien nie, sal ons 'n eksemplaar na die koerant stuur.” Hy sit op die rand van die tafel in die leefvertrek. Nie een van hulle bly hier nie, maar hulle bring meer tyd hier deur as op enige ander plek. Dit is hoe veeleisend die missie is.

“Maak gou.” Leo sit-lê op die bank teen die agterste muur. Uil probeer om nie te bewe nie. Partykeer is hy nie seker hoe hy deurmekaar geraak het met Steve en Leo nie. Êrens langs die pad het die ideale wat Uil aangehang het verdraai geraak sodat eiendom, besittings en selfs mense minder belangrik geword het as die omgewing. Maar nou is hy hieraan toegewy. Hy weet te veel om nou kop uit te trek, en Leo is mal genoeg om hom dood te maak as hy sou probeer. Leo waai sy hand in Steve se rigting. “Ons moet ry. Die wind is perfek.”

Steve staar na die stuk papier. “Ons, die lede van die ROA, is verantwoordelik vir hierdie burgerlike ongehoorsaamheid en is ten volle bewus van die skade wat dit kan aanrig. Hierdeur neem ons 'n openbare standpunt in teen die praktyke van ons gemeenskap in terme van vermorsing en die materialisme wat die dryfkrag agter industrieë soos die luukse huismark is. Heuwelagtige gebiede moet met rus gelaat word, in die oorspronklike vorm, soos dit bedoel is. Dit is beter om nou die plaag van toenemende geldgierige materialisme af

te brand, as om toe te laat dat dit sonder enige beheer inbreuk maak op die heuwels wat ons stad omring. Voortdurende oordadigheid sal bydra tot aardverwarming en die vernietiging van ons planeet. Ons doen 'n beroep op alle mense om te verminder, te herwin en te reageer op die oproep tot omgewingsbewaring. Hierdie is 'n oorlog wat gevoer word vir die bewaring van die aarde. Ons hou by ons besluit. Die ROA."

"Perfek." Leo se stem is droog. Hy staan op en steek sy hande in sy sakke. "Kom ons gaan."

Uil kyk steeds na Steve, en dink aan die brief. "Jy het nie natuurlike hulpbronne genoem nie ... jy weet, die beperkte natuurlike hulpbronne en hoe vermorsing, wanneer mense nie matigheid voor oë hou nie, tot die drastiese vermindering van natuurlike hulpbronne lei wanneer –"

"Bly stil." Leo loop na Uil toe en leun nader aan hom. Sy asem stink na ou uie en Diet Coke. Hy draai na Steve. "Die brief is reg. Laat ons weg wees."

Uil waag dit nie om nog iets te sê nie. Ná die ding met Danny het hy gehoop die ouens skop hom uit. Hy is nie seker hoe anders hy uit hulle greep gaan ontsnap nie – veral omdat hy so baie weet. Sy hande bewoet toe hy deur toe loop. Steve en Leo het agterdogtig geraak ná die ontmoeting met Danny – ongeag of die man die regte dinge gesê het. Leo het selfs gedink hy is dalk 'n polisieman. Dan is daar die speurders wat rondsnuffel na die laaste brand. Uil sidder en gryp sy sak. As hy die polisie van hulle aktiwiteite vertel, sal die ouens hom doodmaak en sy lyk êrens oor die rand van 'n canyon gooi. Leo sal definitief nie twee keer dink om hom dood te maak nie.

"Het jy alles?" Steve se oë pen hom vas. Hulle het dit al 'n paar keer nagegaan. Dit is nie asof dit die eerste brand is wat hulle stig nie. Maar dit sal vir seker die grootste wees. Veral met die wind wat vanaand so waai.

Dit voel vir Uil of hy wil opgooi. Hy dink vir 'n oomblik. Die paraffien is in die katebak. Hy het 'n dosyn sakke, ses groot sigaretaanstekers, en 'n kaart van die vuurpaaië rondom Oak Canyon Estates vir ingeval hulle nie die grondpad kan gebruik om weg te kom nie. Hy knik vir Steve. "Ek het alles."

"Wat van die geweer?" Steve kyk na Leo.

"Moet jy vra?" Leo rol sy oë. "Ek het twee. Laat ons weg wees. 'n Paar van ons ouens gaan vanaand brande stig. Ons wil eerste wees."

Uil se tande begin op mekaar klap. Hy byt op sy tande en loop na die motor toe voor die ander. Aan die begin het hy saamgestem met alles waarvoor die ROA gestaan het. Maar nou ... nou lyk dit of hulle ver verwyder is van hulle doelwit om die omgewing te beskerm. Brandstigting het byvoorbeeld 'n obsessie geword, nie 'n middel tot 'n doel nie. Uil gaan sit op die agterste sitplek. Steve het die groen Honda ingeruil nadat dit by die laaste brandstigting gesien is. Die polisie het nie sy nommerplaat gehad nie; daarom was daar geen moeilikheid tot hy dit ingeruil het nie. En met Steve se salaris kan hy dit bekostig om sy motor in te ruil wanneer hy ook al wil. Nou het Steve 'n Toyota Prius, 'n motor wat van die een stad na die ander kan ry met die minimum brandstof. Uil klim in die motor en probeer sy hart rustig kry.

Miskien, wanneer hulle daar bo is, kan hy te voet weghardloop oor die heuwel en af met die canyon, 'n voetpad êrens kry of 'n ander manier kry om weg te kom. Hy is immers vanaand die brandstigter. Steve en Leo gaan help om die sakke met paraffien neer te sit en sal seker maak dat hulle in die kortste tydjie die meeste vernietiging op die bouverseel kan aanrig. Maar hy wat Uil is, gaan die vlammetjie aansteek.

Hy wonder wat sy kollege-vriende nou van hom sal dink? Red die aarde ... stop aardverwarming ... Toe was hulle ideale so onselfsugtig, so broodnodig vir die oorlewing van die planeet.

Maar nou ...

Voor in die motor blaf Leo bevele uit vir Steve wat bestuur. Sweetdruppels blink op sy gladde kop. "Sit jou ligte af so twintig meter voor die pad wat na die landgoed toe draai. Jy onthou die plek, nè?"

"Natuurlik."

"Ja, maar moenie van die ligte vergeet nie."

Uil het gehoor dat Steve en Leo die plek besoek het, hoe hulle voorgegee het om broers en sakemanne te wees wat tydens hulle etensuur besoek aflê. Iemand het hulle rondgewys. Nou weet hulle presies waar hulle die vure wil begin.

"Ons is amper daar." Leo kan nie stilsit nie. Hy kyk na sy horlosie. "Die tydsberekening is perfek."

"Die wind ook."

Vyf minute later is hulle twee steeds besig om te praat oor die perfekte toestand toe hulle die grondpad nader. Die hoofpad is dié tyd van die nag stil en Steve ry stadiger en sit sy hoofligte af.

"Moenie verby die afdraai ry nie. Ry stadig. Ons kan dit nie bekostig dat 'n sekuriteitswag ons op hierdie stadium hoor nie." Leo spoeg die woorde uit. Net toe hulle met die donker heuwel opry, sê hy skielik: "Haai! Wat is dit?"

"Dit lyk soos 'n sekuriteitstasie." Steve hang oor die stuurwiel en loer tot in die winderige swart nag. "Wanneer het hulle 'n waghuis opgesit?"

"Maak nie saak nie." Leo haal sy geweer uit sy sak en haal dit oor. "Dit lyk of 'n sluitpaal al twee kante versper."

Uil se hart klop vinniger. Hulle gaan tog nie iemand skiet nie, of hoe? Hy hou aan die deur se handvatsel vas. Miskien kan hy uitspring wanneer die motor stadiger ry. Spring en begin hardloop, want Steve en Leo is gek as hulle bereid is om 'n sekuriteitswag te skiet.

"Wat wil jy hê moet ek sê?" Steve ry stadiger.

"Moet niks sê nie! Ry reguit deur."

"Hy sal die polisie bel." Daar is frustrasie in Steve se stem te bespeur. "Hulle sal ons vang voordat ons die eerste vuur aangesteek het."

"Bestuur jy net. Ek sal dit hanteer."

Uil se hart klop vinniger. Hulle moes nooit 'n geweer gebring het nie. Hy byt aan die velletjie langs sy duimnael en wag, wag sy kans af. As Leo iemand skiet, kan hulle almal vir 'n baie lang tyd tronk toe gaan. Hy sak terug in die

sitplek, sy oë wyd oop.

“Daar is ’n wag.” Steve ry nie stadiger nie. “Wil jy steeds hê ek moet deur die sluitpaal ry?”

“Doen dit. Ry vinnig!”

Steve doen wat Leo sê en ry so vinnig moontlik met sy motor. Net toe hulle deur die hek wil ry, kom die wag uit om hulle te keer. Steve ry hom amper raak, maar net voor dit gebeur, swaai hy uit en ry deur die sluitpaal. Die wag het ’n geweer, maar voordat hy dit kan gebruik, lê Leo oor Steve en skiet drie skote.

As gevolg van die chaos vergeet Uil om te spring. Hy sit op die agterste sitplek, sy mond hang oop en hy is dronkgeslaan. Wat het nou net gebeur? Hy wil nie omdraai en kyk nie, maar hy het nie ’n keuse nie. Hy moet weet of die skote die man getref het.

Voor skree Steve: “Hoekom het jy dit gedoen? Het jy hom geskiet?”

“Wie gee om?” Leo wys met sy geweer vorentoe. “Kom ons gaan steek die vuur aan.”

Dit is toe dat Uil omdraai om vinnig oor sy linkerskouer te loer. Die pad kronkel voor hom uit, maar in die dowwe lig van die wagstasie sien hy ’n liggaam lê, die gesig in die grond. Uil voel hoe sy hart nog vinniger klop en dan wild en mal uit ritme begin klop. Leo is mal. Daar is niks in die ROA se riglyne wat enigiets sê oor om mense dood te maak nie. Burgerlike ongehoorsaamheid, ja. Brandstigting en vandalisme, ja. Maar moord? Die spiertjie in sy boonste lip begin saamtrek, en hy kyk na die sakke en aanstekers op die vloer.

Hulle gaan gevang word. Hy kan dit voel.

✱

Holly het hierdie maand nog nie so laat gewerk nie, maar die afgelope tyd is daar vreeslik baie werk. Die rente op verbandlenings is minder en meer mense voel seker positief oor die ekonomie. Wat die rede ook al is, sy het ’n berg papierwerk wat voor haar lê en het môre die een vergadering ná die ander. Dit is beter om die ekstra werk op ’n Donderdagaand af te handel as om die naweek daarmee te sit. Sy trek haar oë op skrefies en veg teen die slaap. Ron het aangebied om te bly en haar te help, om sy eie papierwerk hier saam met haar af te handel.

Maar toe het sy pa ’n pyn in sy bors gekry – iets wat nou al twee keer die afgelope week gebeur het. Ron het besluit dit is beter om hom ongevalle toe te vat sodat hulle toetse kan doen. Net vir ingeval dit iets ernstig is. Dave is doodbekommerd oor die dreigement van brandstigting en die mense wat dalk kan seerkry as die brand wel gestig word.

Holly blameer hom nie, maar sy reken dat as die lede van die ROA Oak Canyon Estates wou aanval, hulle dit reeds lankal sou gedoen het. Die groep het vir seker al sy kanse gehad. Vir twee weke het Holly dit vermy om alleen hier te werk, maar met die wag voel sy veiliger as ooit tevore. Vanaand, selfs met die wind, voel die ontwikkeling soos ’n oase bo die valleivloer: veilig en

kalm. Die wind huil buite, ruk die vensters en waai teen die mure, maar die voorspelling het gesê dat dit gaan lê voor die oggend.

Holly fokus op die papierwerk. Countrymusiek speel oor haar iPod se luidsprekers en Holly sing saam met 'n liedjie van Carrie Underwood. Die lirieke herinner haar daaraan dat dinge met Ron nie goed gaan nie. Hy doen nie meer soveel moeite met haar nie, en sy gee nie regtig om nie.

Haar ma dink hulle twee is belaglik. “Dis soos ek vir jou gesê het, Holly. 'n Mens moet aan die liefde werk. Dit beteken twee besige mense moet tyd maak in hul besige skedule om uit te gaan en te praat en tyd saam deur te bring.”

Holly kon nog nie vir haar ma verduidelik dat 'n mens ook net só hard daaraan kan werk om iets vir iemand te voel nie. As dit nie gebeur nie, is hulle nie –

Skielik hoor sy drie harde, skerp geluide, soos skote wat klap. Holly draai die musiek sagter en sit doodstil. Sy is nie seker nie, maar dit klink soos 'n motor wat met die pad opgeruy kom. Sy kyk na die horlosie net bo die rekenaarskerm. Dit is net ná halfdrie. Wie sal hierdie tyd van die oggend hierheen ry, en wat was daardie geluide?

Sy tel haar radio op, die een waarmee sy met die wag by die hek kan praat. Sy druk die knoppie. “Michael, kom in ... dit is Holly in die kantoor, kom in.”

Sy hoor die gesuis van die radio aan die ander kant, maar niks anders nie.

“Michael, dit is Holly. Ek het iets gehoor en ek moet weet wat dit was.” Vrees laat haar met 'n effense hoër stemtoon praat en sy veg teen die paniek wat in haar opbou. “Kom in, asseblief.”

Weereens is daar nie antwoord nie, maar toe hoor sy definitief 'n motor. Baie nader as voorheen. Sy staan vinnig op, hardloop na die ander kant van die kantoor, en skakel die lig af. Wie dit ook al is, sy wil nie hê hulle moet sien sy is alleen hier nie. Die ander ligte in die huis is reeds af. Sonder om verder tyd te mors, hardloop sy deur die donker kantoor na die telefoon en tel dit vinnig op. Haar oë is steeds vasgenaël op die grondpad en sy bel 911.

Sy klink bang en sê vir die operateur wie sy is, waar sy werk, en dat sy alleen in 'n skouhuis by Oak Canyon Estates is. “Ek dink ek het geweerskote gehoor, en iemand is besig om met die pad op te ry. Dit klink of hulle jaag.”

Die operateur belowe om die polisie uit te stuur. “Bly net waar jy is, en bel as enigiets anders gebeur.”

Net toe Holly die telefoon neersit, kom die motor oor die bult. Dit jaag met die heuwel op tot by die geplaveide straat. Die motor draai skielik skerp regs en jaag tot aan die einde van die straat.

Holly se hart klop wild, en haar mond is droog. Sy kan nie die model of die kleur van die motor sien nie, wat nog te sê die nommerplaat. Maar wat wil die mense in die motor doen? En hoekom antwoord Michael daar by die hek nie? Hy moes hulle voorgekeer het, en as daar moeilikheid was, moes hy 911 gebel het. Wat is besig om te gebeur? 'n Windvlaag waai hard teen die huis se mure. Is die dreigement besig om waar te word? Is die mense in die motor op pad om 'n brand te stig?

Sy bel weer 911 en hierdie keer fluister sy angsbevange. “Iemand het met die heuwel opgejaag gekom. Ek kry nie antwoord by die waghuisie nie. Ek dink iets leliks gaan gebeur.”

Dit is eers nadat sy die telefoon neergesit het dat sy iets vreemd ruik toe dit by die een oop venster ingesweef kom. Dit is nie 'n reuk eie aan konstruksie nie – nie verf of matte nie. Dit is eerder 'n reuk wat haar lam maak van vrees. Dit is die reuk van paraffien.

TWENTY-FOUR

Linda Brady couldn't sleep. Yesterday around this time, Alex had called her to apologize. The best she could make of his call was that God had been working on his heart. He didn't mention the Lord or what had driven him to call her number in the wee hours of the morning, but in his voice she heard a remorse that hadn't been there since before the terrorist attacks.

God must be answering her prayers.

Now she should've been sound asleep. Alex hadn't called again, and no real reason remained for her to be up alone, wandering through the living room looking at old photographs. Her husband Lee was asleep in their bedroom, and already her restlessness had woken him once. He was concerned for her, aware of the situation with Alex, the way that only now – after seven years – he was finally showing signs of returning to the young man he'd once been.

"Everything okay?" he'd asked her an hour ago. He sat up in bed, half awake, his forehead creased with worry.

"Fine." She smiled at him, grateful for him. "I can't sleep. I'll be out in the living room."

Since then she'd read the Bible and straightened the office. The sun would be up soon, but still she couldn't sleep. She looked over the framed pictures that sat on various shelves and hung on the wall in the living room — photos that reminded her of the old days, pictures that kept her company when Lee was at work and she wanted to reminisce.

Alex as an eight-year-old at work with Ben, both of them wearing the FDNY helmets and sitting in the front seat of a fire truck. A family portrait of the three of them when Alex was fifteen. Ben and Alex fishing in the Adirondacks when he was three years old, and another one when Alex was a high school sophomore. Lee didn't mind the photos. He had a past too, a wife who'd been killed in a car accident the summer after the terrorist attacks. Photos were an important part of the healing process, he'd told her.

So the pictures remained.

Linda moved to the window and looked out over Central Park. Their apartment was on the twenty-first floor, and contained an unbelievable view. Lee bought the place the year before they were married, and it suited both of them. She exhaled and her breath left a circle of condensation on the window.

What was it? Why couldn't she get Alex out of her mind? She watched a single cab make its way down Park Avenue and turn at the first light. Maybe it was his apology from yesterday, a strange and joyful piece still trying to fit in the puzzle of her heart. Hearing him yesterday was like getting a trip back to September 10, when Alex was a happy, carefree teenager whose greatest worry was whether he'd passed his chemistry test. Maybe that was it. The way he'd sounded yesterday had given her hope that she might actually get him back, that he could finally let go of the hurt and pain, the desire to make everything right for his father's sake. Maybe he was about to do what he hadn't done since the Twin Towers came down.

Learn to love again.

She lifted her eyes to the full moon hanging just over the park. If he was close to tearing those walls down, then no wonder God had her walking the quiet apartment tonight. She needed to pray. With that she fell into a familiar routine, asking God for her son's emotional healing and for his physical protection. *Keep him safe, God ... his job is so dangerous that any day ... any day could be his last. So guard him, protect him because he seems closer than ever to finding his way back. Keep knocking on his heart so that soon — maybe even tonight — he might turn and trust You again. Please, Lord ...*

A verse filled her heart and soul as soon as she finished that part of her prayer. *Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old he will not depart from it.* It was a promise, one Linda had thought about often in the years since 9/11. But here, in the sacred moment of deep conversation with God, the words almost seemed like an answer. She and Ben had done what God asked of them to the best of their ability. They had trained him up in the way he should go. Now she would pray all night that the rest of the promise would come true, that Alex might return to those ways.

Now, before it was too late.



The call came in just before three in the morning, and Jamie opened her eyes in time to see Clay swing his legs out of bed and snap open his phone. She sat partway up, giving her eyes time to focus. The wind whipped against the house outside, and Jamie felt a chill run down her arms.

Clay listened intently to the caller for a few seconds and then flicked on the light next to his side of the bed. “I know the place. Are the hills burning yet?” He waited a beat. “Okay. I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

Jamie didn’t need Clay to tell her what had happened. He was on call for this very reason — in case there was another fire. The department hadn’t received word of more threats from the REA, but this was the sort of night the ecoterrorists liked. A plan was already in place. If another arson fire was set in the hills, SWAT members would go to the scene immediately — to keep order, aid in the evacuation, and help pursue the suspects.

Clay was already at the closet, pulling his uniform off the hanger and slipping into the olive green shirt.

“Where is it?” Jamie couldn’t shake the cold feeling surrounding her. The wind was warm, and even at this hour she doubted the temperature had dipped below eighty degrees. Even so she felt a chill in the room, and she pulled the down comforter up around her shoulders. “Oak Canyon Estates.” He slipped on his uniform pants and gave her a knowing look. “The place Alex warned us about.”

“It’s close. A couple of SWAT guys live a few miles from there, right?”

“Right. We might have a chance to catch them. There’s no sign of fire yet. The call came from a woman who works at the estates. She was in the office late when she heard gunshots and saw a car speed up and head for the north end of the development. She called us again when she smelled kerosene.”

Jamie’s head began to spin. “A woman?” She was more awake now than before, as suddenly the details lined up and she gasped. “Clay, that’s where she works!”

He was getting into his bulletproof vest now, fastening it and checking the pockets, making sure he had his guns. “Who?”

“The girl. Holly Brooks. The one Alex was in love with before 9/11.”

Clay stopped and stared at her. “Alex’s old girlfriend works at the Oak Canyon Estates?”

“Yes. She has an office all to herself up there.” Jamie smoothed her dark hair and tried to process the information. “The call had to come from her.”

“Dispatch thinks she’s still up there. They advised a rescue could be necessary.”

Jamie brought her hand to her mouth. “Go, Clay. Get her out of there.” She

went to him, circling her arms around his neck. “Be safe.” She kissed him and let her lips linger on his a few seconds longer than usual. “I’m afraid.”

“Don’t be.” They kissed once more. “Pray. God will lead us, Jamie. I already asked Him.”

She didn’t state the obvious, that Jake also had asked God to lead him, but that time the place where God had led was Heaven. On any given call, that could be true for Clay too. She released him and folded her arms around her chest, still trying to get warm. “I’m praying already. Call me if you get a chance.”

He smiled once more at her, then left, running from the room, down the stairs, and along the hallway to the garage. A minute later she heard his car leave the garage and peel down the street.

God ... something big is about to happen, something big and very bad. Please protect Clay and the guys, and protect Holly Brooks.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you ... Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid ...

Jamie stopped shivering. God had heard her; He was with her. Slowly she made her way back to bed and crawled beneath the blankets. The peace of God was stronger than any pill or therapist, more effective than anything she might’ve found in a bottle or an exercise program. Her body began to relax and warmth came over her. There was reason for concern, no question. But with God’s great peace inside her, she had survived before, and she would survive again — whatever the night brought.

She was about to settle back down when an idea hit her. She should call Alex and tell him about the fire, about Holly working at the estates, and that she was possibly trapped on the hillside. Certainly, Alex would want to know. She reached for her cell phone on the table next to her side of the bed and found his number. Then, without waiting another moment, she dialed it.

Two rings ... three ... four. The answering machine picked up. “This is Alex ... leave a message.”

Jamie wasn’t sure what to say, whether she should tell him about the fire, or about Holly, or neither. She hung up without saying anything and as she did, she prayed again, asking God to help the SWAT guys catch the arsonists and the firefighters stop the fire before houses or lives were in danger. But she also prayed that God would be with Alex Brady, who — if he knew about the fire — would’ve been the first on the scene.

For better or worse.



Alex had only been awake for a few minutes, but already he and Bo were in his Dodge, headed as fast as they could for the Oak Canyon Estates. Normally he didn't sleep with the police scanner in his room, because he would never get any sleep. But tonight, with the winds stronger than they'd been yesterday, he'd had two choices. Stay parked where he could watch the traffic up to the estates, or sleep with the radio in his room.

He missed the first few words of the call, but by the time the dispatcher got to the part about Oak Canyon Estates, Alex was up and getting dressed. He made the call to headquarters that he was putting in an overtime shift and responding to the possible fire at the estates. As part of the task force, that much would've been expected of him. He considered leaving Bo at home. His dog had worked a lot lately, and rest was important for any service animal.

But Bo stayed at his side while he got dressed and as he headed for his truck, and when he reached for the door that led to the garage, Bo gave a single bark. His look was unmistakable. *Don't go without me.* Alex gave his head a quick pat. "All right, boy. Come on."

They were backing out of the garage when he checked his iPhone and realized he'd missed a call from Jamie Michaels. She must've been calling about the fire. Either way he'd have to call her back later. He needed all his focus on the job ahead — whatever that job was.

Dispatch had said something about a possible rescue, that the woman who had reported the situation at the estates was still in her office — an employee of the developer. Alex pressed his foot down harder on the gas pedal. This was one time when he didn't want his squad car. The Dodge would take him wherever he needed to go — including off-road. With all the warning he and the department had been given about this moment, Alex couldn't live with himself if someone died.

He was already on the freeway, minutes from the scene. The wind gusted against his truck, forcing him to steady the wheel. No traffic stood in the way, so he picked up speed again, blazing toward the exit.

His thoughts swirled in his head, blurring together and rushing at him from all sides. The verse from Clay — *There is a way that seems right to man, but in the end it leads only to death ...* and the other thing — how God didn't intend for people to eliminate the evil in the world, but to surrender their lives to Him in order to combat the evil within themselves. In the dark of night, with

the wind howling outside, the thoughts surrounded him and mixed with his father's words, the ones captured in Jake's journal, that there would be trouble in this world, but Jesus had overcome the world.

All of it pressed in against his heart and made him glad he'd called his mom, because it was a step. If the first place where evil needed to be conquered was within, then he would check himself from time to time. As for his broken relationship with the Lord, that would have to wait. Right now there were more urgent matters at hand. He squinted at the freeway ahead and moved into the right lane. The exit was a mile up.

Bo must've sensed the seriousness of the call, because he let out a sharp bark. Alex looked at him in the rearview mirror, the loyal eyes, the sense of high alert in the way he held himself. However lonely and driven Alex had become, at least he had Bo. The dog was his most loyal friend. He eased the Dodge onto the exit. Whatever happened tonight, Bo would be part of the solution. The way he always was.

Hoofstuk 24

Linda Brady kan nie slaap nie.

Gister omtrent hierdie tyd het Alex gebel om om verskoning te vra. Uit sy oproep kon sy agterkom dat God besig is om in sy hart te werk. Hy het nie die Here genoem of wat hom aangespoor het om haar in die vroeë oggendure te bel nie, maar in sy stem het sy berou gehoor wat nie daar was voor die terroriste-aanvalle nie.

God is seker besig om haar gebede te beantwoord.

Sy moes al lankal geslaap het. Alex het nie weer gebel nie, en daar is nie eintlik 'n rede hoekom sy alleen wakker moet wees en deur die leefvertrek loop terwyl sy na ou foto's kyk nie. Haar man, Lee, slaap in hulle kamer, en haar rusteloosheid het hom al klaar een keer wakker gemaak. Hy is bekommerd oor haar, bewus van die situasie met Alex, die feit dat hy nou eers – ná sewe jaar – tekens toon dat hy terugkeer na die jong man wat hy eens was.

"Is alles oukei?" het hy 'n uur terug vir haar gevra. Hy het regop gesit in die bed, nog deur die slaap, 'n frons van bekommernis op sy voorkop.

"Alles is reg." Sy het vir hom geglimlag, dankbaar dat hy omgee. "Ek kan nie slaap nie. Ek gaan nou na die leefvertrek toe."

Toe het sy Bybel gelees en die kantoor reggepak. Die son gaan amper opkom, maar steeds kan sy nie slaap nie. Sy kyk na die geraamde foto's wat op verskeie rakke staan en teen die leefvertrek se muur hang – foto's wat haar aan die ou dae herinner, foto's wat haar geselskap hou wanneer Lee by die werk is en sy aan die verlede wil dink.

Alex as agtjarige saam met Ben by die werk, albei van hulle met die

brandweer se hardhoede op hul koppe waar hulle in 'n brandweerwa sit. 'n Gesinsfoto van hulle toe Alex vyftien was. Ben en Alex waar hulle in die Adirondacks visvang toe hy drie jaar oud was, en nog een toe Alex op hoërskool was. Lee gee nie om oor die foto's nie. Hy het ook 'n verlede. Sy vrou is in 'n motorongeluk oorlede die somer ná die terroriste-aanvalle. Foto's is 'n belangrike deel van die genesingsproses, het hy vir haar gesê.

Dus het die foto's gebly waar hulle was.

Linda loop na die venster en kyk uit oor Central Park. Hulle woonstel is op die een-en-twintigste verdieping en het 'n ongelooflike uitsig. Lee het die plek gekoop die jaar voor hulle getroud is, en dit het hulle albei gepas. Sy asem uit en haar asem los 'n ronde kol wasem teen die venster.

Wat is dit? Hoekom dink sy die hele tyd aan Alex? Sy kyk hoe 'n motor met Park Avenue afry en dan regs draai by die eerste verkeerslig. Miskien is dit die feit dat hy gister om verskoning gevra het. Iets vreemds en vreugdevols wat steeds probeer om 'n plekkie in haar hart te kry. Toe sy gister na hom geluister het, was dit asof sy teruggegaan het na 10 September, toe Alex 'n gelukkige, sorgelose tiener was wie se grootste bekommernis was of hy sy chemietoets gaan deurkom of nie. Miskien was dit dít. Hoe hy gister geklink het, het haar hoop gegee dat sy hom dalk kan terugkry, dat hy uiteindelik van die hartseer en pyn ontslae kan raak, die begeerte om die wêreld 'n beter plek te maak vir sy pa se onthalwe. Miskien gaan hy doen wat hy nog nie gedoen het sedert die Twin Towers ineengestort het nie.

Leer om lief te hê.

Sy kyk na die volmaan wat oor die park hang. As hy daardie mure gaan afbreek, is dit geen wonder dat God haar vanaand in die stil woonstel laat rondloop nie. Sy moet bid. Dan begin sy met iets wat sy gereeld doen en vra vir God om haar seun emosioneel te genees en hom fisiek te beskerm. *Hou hom veilig, Here. Sy werk is so gevaarlik dat enige dag ... enige dag sy laaste kan wees. Hou dus wag oor hom, beskerm hom, want dit lyk of hy nader as ooit daaraan is om sy weg terug te vind. Hou aan klop aan sy hart sodat hy vinnig, miskien selfs vanaand, na U toe sal draai en U weer sal vertrou. Asseblief, Here ...*

'n Teksvers vul haar hart en siel die oomblik toe sy klaar gebid het. "Leer 'n jongmens om die regte pad te kies, en wanneer hy eendag oud is, sal hy nie daarvan afwyk nie." Dit is 'n belofte waaraan Linda baie gedink het in die jare ná 11 September. Maar nou, in die heilige oomblik van 'n diep gesprek met God, klink die woorde amper soos 'n antwoord. Sy en Ben het gedoen wat God van hulle gevra het, tot die beste van hulle vermoë. Hulle het hom grootgemaak "om die regte pad te kies". Nou sal sy die hele aand bid dat die res van die belofte waar sal word, dat Alex weer sal terugkeer na daardie "pad".

Nou, voordat dit te laat is.

Die oproep kom net voor drie-uur die oggend, en Jamie word net betyds wakker om te sien hoe Clay uit die bed opstaan en sy selfoon antwoord. Sy sit-lê, laat haar oë toe om te fokus. Die wind waai buite teen die huis, en Jamie voel hoe sy hoendervleis kry.

Clay luister aandagtig vir 'n paar sekondes en skakel dan sy bedlampie aan. “Ek ken die plek. Is die heuwels al aan die brand?” Hy bly 'n rukkie stil. “Goed dan. Ek gaan so gou ek kan.”

Clay hoef nie vir Jamie te vertel wat gebeur het nie. Hulle kan hom enige tyd bel om dié spesifieke rede – vir ingeval daar nog 'n brand is. Daar is nie nog dreigemente van die ROA by die polisie aangemeld nie, maar dit is 'n aand waarvan eko-terroriste hou. 'n Plan is reeds in plek. As nog 'n brand in die heuwels uitbreek, gaan SWAT-lede onmiddellik na die toneel gaan – om die orde te handhaaf, hulp te verleen wanneer dit ontruim moet word, en te help om verdagtes agterna te sit.

Clay is alreeds by sy kas, haal sy uniform van die hanger af en trek die hemp aan.

“Waar is dit?” Jamie kan nie ontslae raak van die koue gevoel wat haar omring nie. Die wind is warm, en selfs hierdie tyd van die oggend twyfel sy of die temperatuur laer as sewe-en-twintig grade is. Maar ten spyte daarvan kry sy koud en trek die kombers tot oor haar skouers.

“Oak Canyon Estates.” Hy trek sy broek aan en kyk na haar. “Die plek waaroor Alex ons gewaarsku het.”

“Dis naby. 'n Paar SWAT-lede bly mos 'n paar kilometer daarvandaan, nie waar nie?”

“Ja. Ons kan hulle dalk vang. Daar is nog geen teken van vuur nie. Die oproep was van 'n vrou wat by die landgoed werk. Sy was tot laat in die kantoor toe sy geweerskote gehoor het en gesien het hoe 'n motor verbyjaag en na die noordelike punt van die ontwikkeling ry. Sy het weer gebel toe sy paraffien ruik.”

Jamie voel duiselig. “'n Vrou?” Sy is wawyd wakker toe die inligting in plek val en sy na haar asem snak. “Clay, dis waar sy werk!”

Hy trek nou sy koeëlvaste baadjie aan, maak dit vas en kyk na die sakke, maak seker hy het sy gewere. “Wie?”

“Die meisie. Holly Brooks. Die een op wie Alex verlief was voor 11 September.”

Clay gaan staan stil en staar na haar. “Alex se eks-meisie werk by Oak Canyon Estates?”

“Ja. Sy werk alleen in 'n kantoor daarbo.” Jamie vryf oor haar donker hare en probeer om die inligting te verwerk. “Sy moes die oproep gemaak het.”

“Hulle dink sy is steeds daarbo. Hulle het gesê daar is 'n moontlikheid dat sy gered moet word.”

Jamie se hand beweeg na haar mond. “Gaan, Clay. Kry haar daaruit.” Sy gaan na hom toe en gooi haar arms om sy nek. “Wees versigtig.” Sy soen hom en haar lippe raak vir nog 'n paar oomblikke aan syne, langer as gewoonlik. “Ek

is bang.”

“Moenie wees nie.” Hulle soen mekaar weer. “Bid. God sal ons lei, Jamie. Ek het Hom reeds gevra.”

Sy sê nie die voor die hand liggende nie, dat Jake ook vir God gevra het om hom te lei, maar dat God hom daardie keer hemel toe gelei het. Dit kan enige tyd ook met Clay gebeur. Sy maak haar arms om hom los en vou dit voor haar bors, probeer steeds warmer word. “Ek bid alreeds. Bel my wanneer jy die kans kry.”

Hy glimlag ’n laaste keer vir haar en hardloop dan van hulle kamer met die trap af, en al langs die ingangsportaal na die motorhuis. ’n Minuut later hoor sy hoe hy sy motor uit die motorhuis trek en dan met die straat af jaag.

Here ... iets groots gaan gebeur, iets groots en baie lelik. Beskerm asseblief vir Clay en die ander manne, en beskerm vir Holly Brooks.

Ek laat vir julle vrede na; my vrede deel Ek met julle ... Julle moet regtig nie ontsteld of beangs word nie.

Jamie bewoë nie meer nie. God het haar gehoor; Hy is by haar. Stadig loop sy terug bed toe en kruip onder die lakens in. God se vrede is sterker as enige pil of berader, dit werk beter as enigiets wat sy in ’n botteltjie of in ’n oefenprogram kan vind. Haar liggaam begin ontspan en ’n warmte spoel oor haar. Daar is beslis rede tot kommer, daarvan is sy seker. Met God se vrede in haar het sy voorheen oorleef, en sy sal weer oorleef – maak nie saak wat vandag inhou nie.

Sy is op die punt om weer aan die slaap te raak toe sy aan iets dink. Sy moet vir Alex bel en vir hom van die brand sê, dat Holly by die landgoed werk en dat sy waarskynlik vasgevang is bo-op die heuwel. Alex sal vir seker daarvan wil weet. Sy tel haar selfoon van die bedkassie op en gaan na sy nommer toe. Dan, sonder om nog langer te wag, bel sy hom.

Dit lui twee keer ... drie keer ... vier keer. Dan tel die antwoordmasjien op. “Dit is Alex ... los ’n boodskap.”

Jamie weet nie wat sy moet sê nie, of sy hom van die brand moet vertel, of van Holly, of nie een van die twee nie. Sy sit die telefoon neer sonder om iets te sê en toe sy dit doen, bid sy weer. Sy vra vir God om die SWAT-lede te help om die brandstigters te vang en die brandweermanne om die vuur te blus voordat huise of lewens in gevaar is. Maar sy bid ook dat die Here saam met Alex Brady sal wees wat – as hy van die brand geweet het – die eerste een op die toneel sou wees.

Ongeag of dit goed of sleg afloop.

✧

Alex het net ’n paar minute gelede wakker geword, maar hy en Bo is reeds in sy bakkie, op pad na Oak Canyon Estates so vinnig as wat hulle kan. Gewoonlik slaap hy nie met die polisieradio in sy kamer nie, want dan sal hy nooit slaap nie. Maar vanaand, met die wind sterker as gister, het hy twee keuses gehad. Óf hy parkeer waar hy die verkeer na die landgoed kan dophou, óf hy slaap met die radio aan in sy kamer.

Hy het die eerste paar woorde van die oproep gemis, maar teen die tyd dat die persoon Oak Canyon Estates genoem het, was Alex reeds op, besig om aan te trek. Hy het hoofkantoor toe gebel en gesê dat hy oortyd gaan werk en reageer op die moontlike brand by die landgoed. As deel van die taakmag sal dit van hom verwag word. Hy het daaraan gedink om Bo by die huis te los. Sy hond het die afgelope tyd baie gewerk, en rus is noodsaaklik vir enige polisie hond. Maar terwyl hy aangetrek het en toe hy na sy bakkie geloop het, het Bo al om sy voete gebly. En toe hy die deur oopmaak wat na die motorhuis lei, het Bo skerp geblaf. Die kyk in sy oë het gesê: “Vat my saam.” Alex het vinnig oor sy kop gevryf. “Oukei, my hond. Kom.”

Toe hulle uit die motorhuis ry, kyk hy na sy selfoon en sien hy het ’n oproep van Jamie gemis. Sy moes seker oor die brand gebel het. Hy sal haar in elk geval later terugbel. Maar nou moet hy op die taak wat voorlê, fokus – wat dit ook al behels.

Die man oor die radio het iets gesê van ’n moontlike reddingstog, dat die vrou wat die situasie by die landgoed aangemeld het, steeds in haar kantoor is – ’n werknemer van die ontwikkelaar. Alex trap die petrolpedaal dieper in. Dit is in sulke gevalle wat hy sy bakkie bo sy polisiemotor verkies. Die bakkie kan hom enige plek neem waar hy wil wees, selfs in die veld. Met al die waarskuwings wat hy en die polisie rakende hierdie oomblik gekry het, sal Alex nie met homself kan saamleef as iemand moet sterf nie.

Hy is reeds op die deurpad, net ’n paar minute van die toneel. Die wind waai woens teen sy bakkie, dwing hom om die stuurwiel stewig vas te hou. Daar is geen verkeer in sy pad nie; daarom ry hy nog vinniger, jaag in die rigting van die afrit.

Gedagtes maal deur sy kop, smelt saam en kom uit alle rigtings. Die teksvers van Clay – “Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; agterna kom dit uit dat dit na die dood gelei het” – en die ander ding: hoe God nie wil hê mense moet die boosheid in die wêreld uitwis nie, maar hulle lewens aan Hom gee sodat hulle teen die boosheid in hulleself kan veg. In die donker nag met die wind wat buite waai, omring die gedagtes hom en meng dit met sy pa se woorde, dié wat in Jake se joernaal opgeteken is, dat daar altyd moeilikheid in die wêreld sal wees, maar dat Jesus gekom het om die wêreld te oorwin.

Alles druk swaar op sy hart en hy is bly hy het sy ma gebel, want dit is ’n tree in die regte rigting. As jou hart die eerste plek is waar boosheid oorwin moet word, dan sal hy sy hart van tyd tot tyd moet nagaan. Wat sy verwaarloosde verhouding met die Here betref, dit sal moet wag. Op die oomblik is daar baie belangriker sake wat aandag moet geniet. Hy trek sy oë op skrefies en kyk na die deurpad voor hom, dan ry hy oor na die regterbaan. Die afrit is nou ’n kilometer weg.

Bo moes agtergekom het dat die oproep ernstig was, want hy het skerp geblaf. Alex kyk na hom in die truspieëltjie, die lojale oë, sy gedrag wat wys hy is gereed vir aksie. Hoe Alex ook al vereensaam het, ten minste het hy vir Bo. Die hond is sy lojaalste vriend. Hy stuur sy bakkie in die rigting van die afrit.

Maak nie saak wat vanaand gaan gebeur nie, Bo sal deel wees van die oplossing. Soos hy nog altyd was.

TWENTY-FIVE

Clay reached the steep dirt road leading up to Oak Canyon Estates just as the first glow of orange appeared from the top of the hill. Firefighters were on the way, but the role of the SWAT team was to check on reports of gunfire and catch whoever set the fires. He and a dozen other officers had been instructed to meet at the entrance to the estates and set up a roadblock. That way, if the arsonists hadn't made their way down the drive, they'd be caught for sure. Clay and Joe could make decisions from there.

Clay was first at the scene and needed to check out the guard station, then establish a roadblock. Why hadn't the person manning the guard booth stopped the car, and what about the possible gunshots the caller had heard? Clay sped the fifty yards up the hill to the small station. As he came closer, his heartbeat quickened. His headlights illuminated a figure lying on the ground, and the gate arm that should've been down was shattered in pieces.

As he pulled up, he saw that the prone figure was in uniform — the security guard. Clay slammed his car to a stop, drew his gun, and climbed out. There was no way of telling how dangerous the situation was, so he stayed low behind his car door. He heard the sound of sirens and the squeal of tires back at the bottom of the road.

The car coming up next was Joe's. He pulled up behind Clay's car and hurried out the same way — gun drawn, low to the ground. "That a body?" he barked.

"Yes. Cover me." With Joe at his back, Clay rushed to the guard's side. He was bleeding from his arm and his side, and Clay felt for a pulse. It was there — faint and fast, same as his breathing. "He's alive," Clay shouted over his shoulder. "Call for an ambulance." He turned back to the guy. "Help's on the way. Don't give up on me now. Come on."

Joe made the call immediately. Wind whipped down the canyon and made it hard for Clay to keep his balance as he hovered over the man. He wanted to get up the hill and check it out, see if the arsonists were still there or if they'd already gone. And there was the woman — was she still trapped up in her office, too afraid to leave? The sirens grew louder still, and a series of squad

cars sped onto the gravel road and up to the spot near the booth. As the others climbed out, Joe took charge so Clay could stay with the victim.

“Set up a partial roadblock. The suspects could be coming down any time.” Joe had grabbed his bullhorn. “But leave room for the fire trucks ...”

The first fire trucks appeared and roared up the hill. They stopped just long enough for a couple of paramedics to jump off the rigs and hurry over to Clay. “We’ve got it. The ambulance will be here in a few minutes.”

Clay took a last look at the man. There was a circle of red oozing from beneath his shoulder, so he uttered a silent prayer for the guard, for his family. *Let him live, God ... don’t let him die here on the roadway. Please, God ...* By now it seemed clear there were no suspects hiding around the booth, looking to ambush them. He ran back to his car and motioned to Joe. “I’m going up.”

“Not by yourself.” They had to yell to be heard above the sound of sirens and vehicles and gusting wind.

“It’ll be fine.” At SWAT scenes protocol was to stay in pairs, but this was different. “We don’t know if anyone’s even up there. But I want it clear before they start on the fire.”

Joe hesitated, then nodded. “Hurry back.”

“You got it.” Clay grabbed his radio and asked that firefighters wait halfway up the road so SWAT could clear the scene of any suspect danger. He was in his car and speeding up the gravel drive even while he was making the order. Word came back from the fire captain that they’d stay a hundred yards shy of the top of the hill until they received word. If the fire moved down into the canyon, they’d fight it from where they were situated.

Clay sped up the hill to the top where the drive intersected the single paved road, then stopped and studied the scene. Three separate houses were fully involved. The lights were off at the model, but the woman who called could still be in there. Another problem became immediately evident. The house at the corner on the right was one of the structures on fire, and already the flames were dancing across the backyard toward a section of the hilly road that Clay had just driven past.

Suddenly, the wind gusted hard, and Clay looked over his shoulder, horrified. In as much time as it took him to breathe, the fire jumped the narrow roadway and lit the brush on the other side, completely blocking the road. There was no way down now, not until the firefighters knocked out the blaze behind him. Clay swallowed hard. *God, this is bad ... I need You. Please, God ... show me what to do.*

He took hold of the radio again and reported what he'd seen. "I need a couple fire units on this thing right away. Clear the road and keep it open. The fire's moving down and to the east, toward the guard booth. We've got three homes on fire, and hillsides catching in each area." His pounding heart pushed him into crisis mode — the place where he could act and react best. He kept his voice clear and calm. "We're gonna need a helicopter drop as fast as possible."

Once more he watched the flames behind him, and a realization hit him hard. The situation had become desperate, the blaze already a monster, pushing up toward the sky, roiling and billowing with the wind, consuming everything in its path. *God, get me out of this, please ... Jamie couldn't stand it if ...*

Clay considered the woman in the model home. For now the fires weren't too close to the place where she must work. Clay was driving toward the model home when something caught his eye off to the left. He turned off his lights and turned slowly in that direction. Down a ways, between two homes, a car sat in the street. Near it, at least two people darted between the buildings. With the sound of the wind, they clearly didn't hear him.

His heart pounded, and he felt the danger rise around him. This was where he should've called for backup, but now that was impossible. The road up to the development was blocked by a wall of flames, so where did that leave him? He radioed to Joe and explained the situation. "There's gotta be another way out, right?"

"I'm on it. What about the woman?"

"Still need to check on her, but she's away from the fires for now. I might have the suspects in sight. I need to deal with them first."

Silence shouted across the other end of the radio lines, and Clay understood. With no real warning, Clay had gotten into a situation that no officer wanted to be in. "Michaels ... watch yourself. We're gonna get you out of there. Don't be a hero."

"I won't." Again he thought about Jamie. "Radio the fire captain. Let me know about an alternate exit out of this place."

The roar of the fire was building around him. With every gust of wind, the burning homes sent a cascading wall of flames into the dry brush surrounding the development. Sprinklers had been activated, but they appeared to have no impact on the fire. The speed of the flames was horrifying, beyond anything Clay had seen before. But he could do nothing about the situation now, so he drove slowly down the road, past a burning house on the right, closer, closer, until he could see one of the men pouring something on a pile of towels near

the base of another house.

The arsonists weren't finished yet; they were still setting fires. Didn't they know the road was already blocked by flames? They were so zealous in their quest to destroy that they were putting their own lives in jeopardy, and they seemed oblivious to the fact.

Clay radioed again, his mind long since made up. "I've got the suspects in sight. I'm moving in." As he finished his sentence, there was an explosion from the other end of the street. Another house went up, and he saw a third figure dart across the road. This was it. If he didn't take every move with the greatest care, he wouldn't miss only his chance at the suspects.

He would miss his chance at getting out of here alive.

Hoofstuk 25

Clay bereik die steil grondpad wat na Oak Canyon Estates lei net toe die eerste oranje gloed bo-op die heuwel verskyn. Brandweermanne is op pad, maar die rol van die SWAT-span is om op die berigte van geweskote te reageer en te vang wie ook al die brand gestig het. Hy en 'n paar ander polisiemanne het die opdrag gekry om by die ingang van die landgoed bymekaar te kom en 'n padblokkade op te rig. Sodoende kan die brandstigters gevang word indien hulle daardie pad gebruik om af te kom. Clay en Joe kan van daar af verdere besluite neem.

Clay is eerste op die toneel en moet kyk wat by die wagstasie aangaan, en dan die padblokkade opstel. Hoekom het die wag nie die motor gestop nie, en wat van die moontlike geweskote wat die persoon gehoor het? Clay jaag teen die heuwel op na die wagstasie toe. Toe hy naderkom, klop sy hart vinniger. Die motor se hoofligte skyn op 'n liggaam wat op die grond lê, en die sluitpaal wat motors moet keer, is in stukkie.

Toe hy by die wagstasie kom, sien hy dat die liggaam wat daar lê 'n uniform aan het – die sekuriteitswag. Clay slaan remme aan, kry sy geweer gereed en klim uit. Hy kan nie sê hoe gevaarlik die situasie is nie; daarom bly hy op sy hurke agter sy motordeur. Hy hoor sirenes en bande skree aan die onderkant van die pad.

Die motor wat volgende opgerig kom, is Joe s'n. Hy parkeer agter Clay en klim op dieselfde manier uit sy motor – geweer gereed, laag op die grond. "Is dit 'n liggaam daardie?" skree hy.

"Ja. Wees op die uitkyk." Met Joe agter hom hardloop Clay vinnig na die wag toe en voel vir sy pols. Daar is 'n pols, lig en vinnig, net soos sy asemhaling. "Hy leef," skree Clay oor sy skouer. "Bel 'n ambulans." Hy draai weer na die man toe. "Hier gaan nou iemand wees om jou te help. Komaan. Hou 'n bietjie

uit.”

Joe bel onmiddellik. Die wind waai in die canyon af en Clay vind dit moeilik om sy balans te hou terwyl hy by die man kniel. Hy wil met die heuwel opry en gaan kyk of die brandstigers nog daar is en of hulle al weg is. En dan is daar die vrou – is sy steeds in haar kantoor, te bang om uit te kom? Die sirenes word harder en ’n klomp polisiemotors jaag met die grondpad op tot naby die wagstasie. Toe die ander uitklim, gee Joe die bevele sodat Clay by die slagoffer kan bly.

“Rig ’n gedeeltelike padblokkade op. Die verdagtes kan enige tyd afkom.” Joe hou sy luidspreker vas. “Maar los genoeg spasie vir die brandweerwaens ...” Die eerste brandweerwaens maak hulle verskyning en ry met die heuwel op. Hulle stop net lank genoeg vir ’n paar paramedici om af te spring en na Clay toe te hardloop. “Ons het dit onder beheer. Die ambulans sal oor ’n paar minute hier wees.”

Clay kyk ’n laaste keer na die man. Daar is ’n plas bloed wat van net onder sy skouer uitloop; daarom bid hy stil vir die wag en sy gesin. *Laat hom lewe, Here. Moenie dat hy hier op die pad sterf nie. Asseblief, Here ...* Teen hierdie tyd is dit duidelik dat daar geen verdagtes in die omgewing van die wagstasie wegkruip in ’n poging om hulle te oorval nie. Hy hardloop terug na sy motor en wys vir Joe: “Ek gaan op.”

“Nie alleen nie.” Hulle moet skree om mekaar te hoor bo die sirenes en motors en rukwinde.

“Ek sal oukei wees.” By SWAT-toneel is die protokol om in pare te bly, maar hierdie keer is dit anders. “Ons weet nie eers of daar iemand daarbo is nie. Maar ek wil seker maak voordat hulle begin om die vuur te blus.”

Joe aarsel en knik dan. “Maak gou.”

“Reg so.” Clay gryp sy radio en vra dat die brandweermanne halfpad na bo sal wag sodat SWAT eers kan seker maak dat enige verdagtes van die toneel verwyder word. Hy is nou in sy motor en jaag al langs die grondpad terwyl hy die bevele uitdeel. Die kaptein van die brandweer laat weet dat hulle sowat honderd meter voor die bokant van die heuwel sal wag totdat hulle weet wat aangaan. As die vuur afbeweeg tot in die canyon, sal hulle dit beveg vanwaar hulle wag.

Clay jaag met die heuwel op tot bo waar die pad by die geplaveide straat aansluit, dan stop hy en bekijk die toneel. Drie huise is aan die brand. Die ligte by die skouhuis is af, maar die vrou wat gebel het, is moontlik steeds daarbinne. Nog ’n probleem is dadelik sigbaar: Die huis regs op die hoek is een van die strukture wat brand, en die vlamme dans reeds in die agterplaas in die rigting van ’n pad waarby Clay nou net verbygery het.

Skielik ruk die wind hard en Clay kyk verskrik oor sy skouer. So lank dit hom neem om in te asem, spring die vuur oor die smal pad en steek die veld aan die ander kant aan die brand, versper die pad heeltemal. Daar is geen manier vir hom om weer onder te kom nie, nie totdat die brandweermanne die vuur agter hom geblus het nie. Clay sluk hard. *Here, dit is verskriklik ... Ek het U*

nodig. Asseblief, Here ... wys vir my wat om te doen.

Hy tel weer sy radio op en laat weet almal wat hy gesien het. “’n Paar brandweermanne moet dadelik hieraan begin werk. Blus die vuur oor die pad en hou dit oop. Die vuur beweeg af na die oostekant toe, in die rigting van die wagstasie. Hier is drie huise wat brand, en die veld rondom elkeen is besig om vlam te vat.” Sy kloppende hart dwing hom om krisisbeheer toe te pas – dit wat hy so goed kan doen. Hy hou sy stem duidelik en kalm. “Ons gaan so gou moontlik ’n helikopter nodig hê om die vuur te help blus.”

Hy kyk weer na die vlamme agter hom, en dan tref dit hom. Die situasie het baie gevaarlik geword. Die vuur is reeds ’n monster, dit lek tot in die lug, rol soos branders en vreet alles weg wat in sy pad is. *Here, red my uit die vlamme, asseblief... Jamie sal dit nie kan hanteer as ...*

Clay dink aan die vrou in die skouhuis. Op hierdie stadium is die vlamme nog nie so na aan die plek waar sy behoort te werk nie. Clay ry in die rigting van die huis toe iets aan die linkerkant sy aandag trek. Hy skakel sy motor se ligte af en draai stadig in daardie rigting. ’n Entjie daarvandaan, tussen twee huise, staan ’n motor in die pad. Naby die motor is daar twee mense wat tussen die geboue rondhardloop. As gevolg van die wind hoor hulle hom duidelik nie.

Sy hart klop vinniger en hy voel hoe die gevaar hom omring. Dit is nou dat hy vir bystand moet vra, maar dit is op die oomblik onmoontlik. Die pad na die ontwikkeling word deur ’n muur van vlamme versper. Wat staan hom nou te doen? Hy praat met Joe oor die radio en verduidelik die situasie. “Daar moet tog ’n ander manier wees om hier uit te kom, nie waar nie?”

“Ek sal gou uitvind. Wat van die vrou?”

“Ek moet nog gaan kyk waar sy is, maar sy is vir nou ver van die vuur. Ek dink ek sien die verdagtes. Hulle vereis vir nou eers my aandag.”

Daar is stilte aan die ander kant en Clay verstaan. Sonder enige waarskuwing bevind hy hom nou in ’n situasie waarin geen polisieman wil wees nie. “Michaels ... wees versigtig. Ons sal jou daaruit kry. Moenie ’n held probeer wees nie.”

“Ek sal nie.” Weereens dink hy aan Jamie. “Praat asseblief met die brandweer se kaptein. Laat weet my as daar ’n ander uitgang is.”

Die vuur begin erger om hom woed. Met elke rukwind stuur die huise wat brand ’n golwende muur van vlamme tot in die droë veld wat die ontwikkeling omring. Sproeiers het aangegaan, maar dit lyk nie of dit enigsins ’n impak op die vuur het nie. Die spoed van die vlamme is verskriklik, erger as enigiets wat Clay nog gesien het. Maar hy kan niks aan die situasie doen nie; daarom ry hy stadig met die pad af, verby ’n brandende huis aan die regterkant, nader, nader, totdat hy sien hoe een van die mans iets op ’n hoop sakke naby nog ’n huis uitgooi.

Die brandstigers is nog glad nie klaar nie; hulle stig steeds brande. Weet hulle nie dat die pad alreeds deur vlamme geblokkeer is nie? Hulle is so ywerig besig om te vernietig dat hulle hul eie lewens op die spel plaas, en dit lyk nie eers of hulle bewus is daarvan nie.

Clay praat weer oor die radio, hy het reeds besluit wat hy gaan doen. “Ek sien die verdagtes. Ek beweeg nou in.” Net nadat hy sy sin voltooi het, is daar ’n ontploffing aan die ander kant van die pad. Nog ’n huis gaan in vlamme op, en hy sien ’n derde persoon wat oor die pad hardloop. Dit is nou of nooit. As hy nie versigtig is nie, sal hy nie net die kans laat verbygaan om die verdagtes te vang nie. Maar hy sal ook sy kans om lewend hieruit te kom deur sy vingers laat glip.

TWENTY-SIX

Alex had just reached the base of the main drive up to Oak Canyon Estates when he heard that Clay was trapped at the top with as many as three suspects. He pictured CJ and Sierra and Jamie waiting at home, and he clenched his jaw. Nothing was going to happen to Clay Michaels. Not tonight. Not if he could help it. Alex saw the roadblock leading up to the estates and made the decision quickly. He sped past the turnoff and drove another half-mile to an unmarked road so narrow it could've passed for a trail.

It was a fire road, one intended as alternate access to the hillsides in case firefighters needed another way up. For now, though, they would certainly be fighting the fire up along the main drive, which meant Alex could get his truck up the hill much faster this way. He would radio his whereabouts later.

He reached the top in time to see four houses fully engulfed in fire. But there was something else. At the far end of the road, there was some kind of activity. One car, or maybe two. It was hard to tell in the wind and smoke that swirled across the paved road ahead. Alex flipped off his lights, slammed his truck into a lower gear, and four-wheeled from the fire road through some brush and between two unfinished houses. Once he touched asphalt, he raced down the street past the burning homes. He saw what he already knew — that the main road was on fire, cut off from emergency vehicles.

Bo released a series of barks as he took in the scene, the flames and wind, the speed of Alex's truck. "It's okay, Bo ... we're almost there."

Ahead Alex saw what looked like Clay's car, and beyond that another vehicle. Alex drew closer, and shock slammed into him when he saw what was unfolding up ahead. One of the suspects was holding Clay facedown against the hood of his car at what looked like gunpoint.

Alex felt rage building, consuming him. This was the REA, setting fires and now threatening to take the life of his friend. He pulled off the road again and hid himself between two houses that weren't burning. They hadn't seen him; he was sure of it. The guy with the gun hadn't looked up or signaled to anyone. With the wind and fire and sirens, the noise of his truck hadn't been

loud enough to catch their attention.

When he was far enough between the two houses that he was sure they couldn't see his truck, Alex slammed the gear into park, opened the back door for Bo, and told the dog to heel. Bo lifted his eyes to him, and his look seemed to say he wasn't afraid. He would stay by Alex's side whatever the call, whatever the danger. Alex patted Bo's head. "Good boy, Bo ... let's get 'em."

With his gun drawn, he slipped around the back of the house and made his way through the rear yards until he could slide around the corner of one of the houses and get a clear view. A second armed man ran up to the first. In the glow of streetlights, Alex recognized him. It was the bald guy — one of the two REA men with Owl that day at the park.

Alex's desperation grew, and he and Bo moved through the shadows toward Clay. He needed to catch them unaware, order them to freeze at the same time. That way he'd have the advantage and could take both guys out if he needed to before they could fire a shot at Clay.

He flashed Bo an open hand with just his index finger pointing straight out. The sign for Bo to keep quiet, not to bark — no matter what. Clay was in imminent danger, without any time to spare. They weren't going to kill him; Alex wouldn't let it happen. He stayed low and ran as fast as he could until he was a few feet from the suspects. They still had their backs to him, their focus entirely on Clay.

"Police!" he shouted loud enough to be heard above the sound of the wind and fire around them.

For a few seconds, the two men froze. Now that Alex was closer he could see that one of the guys with Clay was Owl, and that he didn't appear to be armed. It was the taller man who had the gun pressed to Clay's back. Alex raised his voice again. "Get your hands up now, or I'll release my dog." He gave Bo a different signal, and the dog let out a series of barks and loud growling sounds.

Owl's hands came up, just as he turned and looked into Alex's eyes. Clearly Owl recognized him, and he shouted at the bald guy, "He's got a gun and a dog. Do what he says!"

Instead, Owl's accomplice fired wildly at Clay and, in the same motion, spun around and aimed his gun at Alex. It took just one bullet from Alex's gun to level the suspect, knocking him to the ground, motionless. Clay was writhing against the car, holding his shoulder. "I'm okay ... it's just my arm," he shouted. Alex was about to signal Bo to watch Owl and the man on the ground so he could go to his friend, when there was a blur of movement

behind him.

Before he could cock his gun, Bo barked once and leaped back into the shadows at a man Alex hadn't even seen, a man who had come up behind them unnoticed and now was just a few feet away. With a ferocious second bark, Bo knocked the third man to the grass, but as he did, the man fired once at Bo's chest.

"No!" Alex held up his gun, his knees weak. "No ... Bo, come here!"

Bo let out a sound Alex had never heard from his dog. The man's gun flew from his hand as he and Bo fell to the ground. Alex was breathing hard, gasping. "Bo, come here, boy!"

"He's shot." Clay's voice rose above the noise. "Get the suspect's gun."

Alex saw the weapon a few feet from him. He grabbed it and shoved it in his back pocket, his eyes never leaving those of his dog. Bo was lying limp across the suspect's chest, his regal head looking back for Alex. In that split second, Alex saw in Bo's eyes something he'd never seen before, something that told him the situation was terribly serious.

Bo's eyes were glazed with fear.

"Hold on, Bo!"

The suspect's glasses were on the ground and he groped about, pushing Bo off him. Alex wanted to scream at him, ask him why he would set fire to houses and shoot at deputies under the guise of environmentalism. He aimed his gun at the man, but the suspect was no longer armed.

"Freeze!" Alex was shaking, desperate to help Bo. It took every bit of restraint to keep from pulling the trigger, but the suspect did as he asked. He stopped and raised his hands slowly into the air.

Alex gave a quick glance over his shoulder and saw Clay reach into the car and pull out a T-shirt from his passenger seat. "Help me with this." He waved it in Alex's direction. Owl still stood nearby, his face frozen in shock.

Bo was whimpering now, a sick, slow sort of whine. All around them the wind and fire raged, and Alex noticed two more houses now covered in flames that had spread from the other burning structures. "Hold on, boy." He yelled the words at his dog and raced over to his friend, his gun still aimed straight at the third suspect.

He turned just long enough to take the T-shirt from Clay and tie it above the gunshot wound on his upper arm. The wound was bleeding, but not badly

enough to be life-threatening. Not yet, anyway, and the tourniquet would help. “You okay?” Alex was breathing hard. He pulled tight on the T-shirt ends and made sure the pressure was in the right place.

“I’m fine.” Clay was in pain, but he was handling it. He looked down the street and shook his head. “We’re in trouble, buddy. We gotta get out of here.”

A quick look at the suspect on the ground told Alex what he suspected from the beginning. The guy was dead.

“What ... what about the fire?” Owl shouted from where he stood, motionless, petrified.

“Don’t move,” Alex barked at him. But before he could leave Clay and turn the gun back at the third suspect, the guy took off, running down the street toward the model home.

“Let him go.” Clay winced, holding his arm against his waist. “Bo needs you.”

Alex felt sick as he turned his attention to Bo. The dog wasn’t moving, but he still had his head a few inches off the ground, his eyes on Alex, where they had no doubt been since the gun had gone off nearly two minutes ago. Alex slipped his gun back into the holster and fell to his knees at his dog’s side. “Bo ... hold on, buddy. It’s okay.” In the light of the street lamp he could see the dark, wet circle spreading out from Bo’s furry chest.

There was no telling where the bullet was, whether it had cleared the dog and maybe only left a wound that could be treated, or whether his injury was much worse. Alex wouldn’t let himself think about it. He lowered his face to Bo’s and talked calmly against the dog’s ear. “It’s okay, Bo ... hold on, boy. It’s okay.” As Alex straightened again, Bo twisted his head back and licked Alex’s hand. Like before, his eyes never left Alex’s.

Always, Alex had been able to guess what his dog was thinking, and this moment was no exception. Bo’s eyes told him of a love and loyalty that couldn’t be measured, a care and concern that went beyond his desire to look after himself. In his eyes Alex could see that whatever the outcome, Bo would’ve done the same thing again. He had taken a bullet intended for Alex, and that was something Bo had been willing to do from the moment the two paired up.

Alex hadn’t really cried since right after his dad was killed. The guy he’d been before the terrorist attacks grieved his father long into the night that awful Tuesday, but afterwards buried his pain deep and allowed his

determination to drive him. He'd struggled a few times, sure — like when he said his last good-bye to Holly. But he hadn't cried once.

Until now.

With tears hot against his cheeks, he swept his dog into his arms, stood up, and ran him back to his truck. He looked at Clay, and his sick feeling doubled. His friend didn't look good. "Stay here. I'll be right back," he yelled.

"What about me?" It was Owl, his frightened shriek rising above the sound of the fire and wind.

Alex stopped for half a second and stared at the guy through the smoke and blowing embers. "Don't move."

Clay was pale and his skin looked clammy. He leaned against his car and closed his eyes. The sound of a helicopter rose above the sound of the roaring fire, and Alex realized what was happening. Air drops on the fire. That would help, but already the development was an inferno.

Running as fast as he could, Alex carried Bo to the truck and set him carefully across the backseat. "Come on, Bo ... you can do this." He spoke the words as calmly as he could, because Bo could sense trouble in his voice. The dog had always been perceptive, and right now he needed to believe that Alex thought he had a chance. And Alex did think so. He refused to think otherwise. Of course, Bo had a chance. He wasn't going to die. He'd survived these last few minutes, so now they only had to get him to a vet hospital.

Alex pulled his truck out of its hiding place and screeched up to the spot where Clay was still leaning against his car. Moving as fast as he could, Alex ran from his truck, grabbed Clay, and walked him to the front passenger seat, helping him inside.

"You!" he barked at Owl. "Get in the back."

Owl didn't need to be told twice. He lurched forward and vaulted himself into the truck bed.

Alex jumped back in behind the wheel and glanced at Clay. "Hang in there."

"How ... how are we ... getting through the fire?" Clay slumped against the back of his seat, struggling to keep his eyes open. "Everything's burning."

"I know another way." Alex peered down the street. Clay was right. The fire was burning across the main street of the development now, moving closer to the model home. But it didn't matter. They'd have to get through it somehow, because on the other side of the flames, the fire road would still be a safe way

down the mountain.

Alex took off and radioed a quick update — one suspect dead, one in custody, one at large. “I’ve got two victims — Michaels and my dog.” He explained that he was heading down the fire road half a mile west of the Oak Canyon turn off. His words were sharp and fast. “I’ll need a couple of ambulances.”

“Ten-four. Stop at the model home. The woman who made the call is still there. She was trapped by the fire, same as Sergeant Michaels.”

Alex looked at Clay and then over his shoulder at Bo. Every minute counted at this point — for both of them. But if a woman was trapped in the model home, he’d have to get her. He was sizing up the extent of the fire ahead of him when he spotted a car parked outside the model, a car he’d missed the first time he’d passed by. It must’ve belonged to the woman.

Alex dragged his fist over his eyes. No more tears. He couldn’t break down now, not when he had so much to do. Again he looked back at Bo, and even now his dog was watching him, looking almost apologetic, like he still wanted to help but his body would no longer let him. Alex shifted his attention to his friend. “You with me, Michaels?”

“I’m here.” Clay sounded sleepy, dizzy. He was still losing blood, and he needed to get to a hospital. But Alex had to get the woman first. “I’ve gotta check the model house. Dispatch says the woman who called in is still in there.”

“Check it.” Clay lifted his good hand, his voice a little stronger than before. “I’ll be fine.”

Alex drove up nearly to the front door of the model, jumped out, and raised his gun. He couldn’t be too safe. The other suspect had run in this direction, and there was no telling if he’d gotten hold of another gun. Already once today he’d forgotten the possibility of additional suspects. He hurried to the front of the house and tried the handle, but it was locked. He pounded the butt of his gun against the door. “Police ... anyone here?” By now he expected that somehow she’d escaped, run down the street toward the fire road, knowing that her car wouldn’t have made it. Certainly, the developer would’ve told his employees about the alternate way out.

He was about to kick in the door and check the place — just in case some other REA member was holding the woman hostage, when suddenly the door opened and a frantic-looking woman stepped out. “I thought they’d forgotten about — “ She stopped, stunned.

For a long moment, Alex couldn’t do anything but stare at her, too shocked to

act or think or do anything but try to make sense of what he was seeing.

“Alex?” She swayed, confused, terrified. “I ...” she looked over her shoulder. “I didn’t know whether it was safe to come out and ...”

“Holly, you ... you made the call?”

“Yes.” She was shivering. “I work here.”

He tried to find his way back to the urgency of the moment. “Are you by yourself?”

“Yes. They stayed away from the model.” She stepped out, and from that vantage point she must’ve been able to see the full extent of the blaze for the first time. She put her hand over her mouth. “The fire ... it’s everywhere!”

Another helicopter was approaching overhead, dropping a load of chemical fire retardant over the part of the street Alex had to get through in order to reach the fire road. “Come on.” He put his gun back and grabbed her hand. “We have to get out of here.”

He couldn’t process everything his heart was feeling. Holly Brooks worked at Oak Canyon Estates? All this time he’d gone by the place and even driven down this street and he’d never known that she —

Another explosion sounded from behind them, and the house next to the model burst into flames. The wind was pushing burning embers in every direction, so it was only a matter of minutes before the model went up too. He raced with Holly to his truck and helped her into the backseat next to Bo. “My dog got shot.” He looked at her for half a second, and he knew she could feel the pain in his eyes. Her appearance was still familiar, still the Holly he’d known and loved when he was a boy. She gave the slightest nod as she climbed into his truck, as if to say she’d help the dog, whatever she could do.

Once he was back in the driver’s seat, Alex put his hand on Clay’s knee. “Talk to me, man. You doing okay?”

“I need ... a doctor.”

“You’ll get one.” Alex refused the feelings that had come instantly to life when he looked into Holly’s eyes. The REA wasn’t going to kill Clay or Bo, not him or Holly, not while Alex had anything to say about it. He jerked the truck into reverse, and as soon as they were facing the right direction, he shoved the gearshift into drive. “Everybody hold on.”

From the back of the truck, Owl let out a petrified yell. The fingers of fire that blew over the street ahead of them were thinner now, but the road was still

covered by a towering fifteen-foot wall of flames. Alex gritted his teeth and slammed his gas pedal hard to the floorboard. In a rush of heat and bright orange, the Dodge passed clean through the blaze and onto the street beyond it. Only then did Alex allow himself to exhale.

He checked his rearview mirror. Owl had his hands over his head, but he was fine. They'd done it; they'd cleared the fire. In that moment he saw the third suspect on the side of the road waving at them, his face stricken. Alex didn't trust the guy. He'd have to come back for him. Up ahead Alex was right about the fire road. The way was clear. But for a few burning houses on the right side of the street, the fire was all headed downhill, away from the fire road.

He reached the end of the street and jerked his truck into four-wheel drive. As he did he looked back at Holly, but she was bent over Bo, stroking his side, whispering to him, comforting him. Alex looked straight ahead and swallowed another wave of tears. He would get them out of here, because he had to get them to safety. He commanded his truck over the rough terrain between the development and the fire road, and once he was on the narrow dirt trail, he flew as fast as he could down the hill.

At the base of the road, a host of emergency vehicles were waiting. He barreled toward them and slid to a stop a few yards from the first ambulance and a group of waiting paramedics with a stretcher. Alex jammed the gearshift into park and tore out of his truck. Clay was his first concern. He waved the medics to the passenger side, and one of them beat him to the door.

"My dog!" Alex shouted at the other paramedics near the second ambulance. "He's in the back."

A pair of them hurried with another stretcher to the back door of Alex's truck. At the same time, two additional medics ran up to Clay with the stretcher and, as Alex reached Clay's side, his friend opened his eyes. "Hey ... thanks." His mouth sounded dry, and he looked drawn and pale. "Can't believe ... you got us out of there. Whole hillside's ... on fire." He looked back toward the truck. "I'm okay." He paused, his breathing harder than before. "Go get Bo."

A pair of SWAT officers took Owl from the back of the truck bed, and Alex shouted at them. "Third suspect's still up there."

"We'll put out an APB," one of them yelled back at him. "But it's too dangerous to go back up."

Alex took a step back, torn. The medics had an IV in Clay and already were assessing his vitals. Alex caught the eye of the first medic, and the guy gave him a slight nod that told him what he wanted to know. Clay was going to be okay. They'd reached the bottom of the hill in time.

“Get ... Bo,” Clay sounded as serious as he could, given the situation.

Alex nodded. He turned and ran to the other side of his truck where a couple of guys were lifting Bo carefully and setting him on the stretcher. Holly had stayed beside him, and now she was stooped over him, her long hair hanging against his side as she stroked his head and his ears.

Alex looked at her for a fleeting moment. “Thank you.”

She didn’t say anything, just brought her fingers to her mouth. That’s when he saw that she was crying. He didn’t have time to think about her tears, about why she was crying and whether the reason was because of Bo or because of him or because they’d nearly died in a fire. All that mattered right now was Bo. Alex moved in closer to the stretcher, and Holly backed up to make room for him.

“Hey, Bo ... it’s okay. I’m here.” Bo’s eyes were closed, and he wasn’t moving. Alex put his hand along the side of his dog’s face, and at the sound of Alex’s voice, at the feel of his touch, Bo opened his eyes and looked straight at him. He tried to lift his head, but this time he could only bring it an inch off the stretcher.

One of the medics was getting an IV into him, but he could hear the two guys whispering and he straightened, his voice stern. “He’s gonna make it, right?”

The medics swapped a look, and it made Alex want to scream. The medic at the foot of the stretcher shrugged. “We’re taking him to the vet hospital in Calabasas. We’ll do everything we can.”

Alex took hold of the guy’s arm. “He’s going to be okay. He would’ve bled out by now if the bullet had gotten him somewhere bad.”

The other paramedic started pushing the stretcher. “We need to go. You coming with us?”

Suddenly, Alex was torn again. The guy who had shot Bo was still up there, still scrambling around in the fire without his glasses. The SWAT deputies were right about the danger of going back up the hill. But what if the guy escaped? He’d walk the streets again until they found a new meeting place and another few members. Next time the wind blew, they’d be setting fires to some other development. Willing to kill people all for the sake of some sick radical environmentalism. Or the guy might die in the fire, and Alex would have to live with that on his conscience, knowing that he’d left the man on the side of the road in his haste to get Clay and Bo to safety.

The ambulance with Clay inside pulled away, its sirens adding to the sound of the relentless wind and the raging fire on the other side of the hill. Alex could

feel the urgency again, feel it pushing him back to his truck. Bo would be okay. They would get him to the hospital and take out the bullet, stitch him up, and give him some fluids. He had to be okay. Alex walked alongside the stretcher and watched as they moved it into the back of the ambulance. He crawled up inside and sat as close to Bo as he could, but again Bo's eyes were closed.

"We gave him something for the pain." One of the medics stuck his head in the back. "He'll be asleep in a minute or two."

Alex nodded, but he didn't look at the guy. Drugs were a good idea. Very good. Let Bo sleep. He needed rest after all he'd been through. One of the medics slipped into the back on the other side of the dog. He checked the IV bag and added another medication to the fluid.

"Bo ..."

Panic edged in around the moment. "Can you hear me, Bo?"

The dog's eyes twitched a few times and then opened. They looked clearer than before, and the fear from earlier was gone. For a long time — Alex wasn't sure if it was a minute or five minutes — Bo looked at him, never blinking, never once looking away. In all their time together, Alex had never seen Bo look sad, but he looked that way now. His dark eyes shone with a sorrow too deep to see the bottom of it.

"You're going to be okay, boy." Alex felt a lump in his throat, and he swallowed hard against it. "You're a good dog, Bo." Alex stroked the dog's head. "Such a good boy, Bo."

"We have to get going." The medic standing outside the ambulance tapped on the open door.

Alex held up his hand and kept his eyes on the dog. The medicine must've been kicking in because Bo blinked a few times very slowly. When it looked like he might be asleep, he struggled one last time to open his eyes and then closed them a final time, knocked out by the drugs.

"Good boy, Bo." Alex eased his dog's head into his arms and cradled him for a few seconds. "You're gonna be okay." Alex pressed his face against Bo's and then set him back down on the stretcher. He had to get the suspect before he could be finished here, but he didn't want Bo to make the trip to the hospital alone.

Alex remembered Holly, and as he stepped out of the ambulance he turned to her. "Could you go with him? In case he wakes up?" He was talking fast, his own fear consuming him, no matter what he wanted to believe about Bo being okay.

“Sure.” She wiped the tears on her cheeks as she hurried to the ambulance.

“You know,” Alex stepped aside so she could climb in, “so he’s not afraid?”

“Of course.” She took the place where Alex had been sitting and began petting Bo’s head and side. “Why aren’t you going?”

He could feel his eyes grow flinty hard. “I’m not finished here.”

“Alex ...” her expression changed, and shock filled her eyes. “You aren’t going back up? The fire ...”

“I have to.” He moved back. “I’ll meet you at the hospital as soon as I can.” He took a last look at Bo, then found her eyes again and stared for a long moment into those deep blue pools. “Thank you.”

The other medic was already in the driver’s seat, ready to pull away. Alex slammed the doors shut and hesitated only for a few seconds as the ambulance made a U-turn and headed back toward the freeway. A few SWAT cars were in the area, and as Alex ran back to his Dodge, one of the officers shouted at him. “Where are you going?”

“There’s still a man up there — one of the suspects. Somebody has to get him.”

“Not you, Brady. You won’t have backup,” Joe said.

“I don’t care.” He was already back in his truck, refusing whatever Joe might be saying next. He wouldn’t disobey orders, but he had to hear them in order to follow them. And right now he wasn’t listening.

Alex felt a sense of purpose as he pushed the truck up the hill, bouncing and skidding around corners and narrow stretches of road. He’d vowed that no one would die at the hands of a fire set by the REA, and already one suspect was dead. But not another one, not when he and the entire headquarters knew this was coming. It wasn’t like 9/11, when the country was blindsided by the terrorist attacks. This time they had known, and maybe they hadn’t done enough to stop it. Either way, no one else was going to die — not tonight. He would see to it.

Hoofstuk 26

Alex het so pas die onderkant van die pad wat na Oak Canyon Estates lei, bereik toe hy hoor dat Clay bo-op die heuwel vasgevang is saam met drie verdagtes. Hy stel hom voor hoe CJ en Sierra en Jamie by die huis wag, en hy kners op sy tande. Niks gaan met Clay Michaels gebeur nie. Nie vanaand nie.

Nie as hy dit kan verhelp nie. Alex sien die padblokkade en maak gou 'n besluit. Hy jaag verby die afrit en ry nog agt honderd meter na 'n paadjie so nou dat 'n mens kan dink dit is 'n voetpaadjie.

Dit is 'n vuurpad, alternatiewe toegang tot die heuwel vir ingeval brandweermanne 'n ander roete tot bo nodig het. Vir nou is hulle definitief besig om die vuur al langs die hoofpad te beveg, wat beteken Alex kan vinniger met sy bakkie met hierdie pad tot bo ry. Hy sal later oor die radio laat weet waar hy hom bevind.

Hy bereik die bokant net betyds om te sien hoe vier huise brand. Maar daar is nog iets. Aan die verste punt van die pad is daar die een of ander aktiwiteit. Een motor, of miskien twee. Dit is moeilik om te sien met die wind en rook wat oor die geplaveide pad voor hom waai. Alex skakel sy ligte af, verander na 'n laer rat en verlaat die vuurpad, en ry dan deur die bosse en tussen twee onvoltooide huise deur. Die oomblik toe hy op die teerpad is, jaag hy met die straat af verby die brandende huise. Hy sien wat hy reeds weet – dat die hoofpad versper word deur vuur, afgesny van alle hulp.

Bo blaf 'n paar keer terwyl hy na die toneel kyk, na die vlamme en die wind, hoe Alex met sy bakkie jaag. “Dis oukei, Bo. Ons is amper daar.”

Voor hom sien Alex 'n motor wat soos Clay s'n lyk, en verder af nog 'n motor. Hy ry nader en skrik toe hy sien wat voor hom afspeel. Een van die verdagtes druk Clay vas met sy gesig teen die motor se enjinkap en dit lyk of die man 'n geweer teen sy kop hou.

Alex voel hoe die woede in hom opvlam, hom oorheers. Dit is die ROA wat brande stig en dreig om sy vriend se lewe te neem. Hy ry weer van die pad af en kruip weg tussen twee huise wat nie brand nie. Hulle het hom nie gesien nie; daarvan is hy seker. Die man met die geweer het nie opgekyk of vir iemand 'n teken gegee nie. Met die wind en vuur en sirenes het hulle nie die bakkie gehoor sodat dit hul aandag trek nie.

Toe hy ver genoeg tussen die twee huise is en seker is hulle kan nie die bakkie sien nie, sluit Alex die bakkie af, maak die agterdeur vir Bo oop en beveel die hond om te sit. Bo lig sy oë na Alex en uit die manier waarop hy vir Alex kyk, is dit duidelik dat hy nie bang is nie. Hy sal by Alex bly wat dit ook al verg, maak nie saak watter gevaar dit inhou nie. Alex vryf Bo se kop. “Oubaas se hond ... kom ons vang hulle.”

Met sy geweer oorgehaal kruip hy agter om die huis en hardloop deur verskeie agterplase totdat hy om die hoek van een huis seil en 'n duidelike uitsig kry. 'n Tweede gewapende man hardloop na die ander man toe. In die gloed van die straatligte herken Alex hom. Dit is die kaalkopman – een van die twee ROA-lede wat daardie dag saam met Uil in die park was.

Alex voel die desperaatheid in hom opwel en hy en Bo beweeg deur die skaduwees in Clay se rigting. Hy moet hulle vang sonder dat hulle dit verwag, hulle saam beveel om stil te staan. Op daardie manier het hy die voordeel en kan hy, as dit nodig is, al twee mans skiet voordat hulle op Clay skiet.

Hy wys met sy hand na Bo, met net sy wysvinger in die lug. Die teken vir Bo

om stil te bly, om nie te blaf nie, ongeag wat gebeur. Clay is in dreigende gevaar en hulle kan nie tyd mors nie. Hulle gaan hom nie doodmaak nie; daarvoor sal Alex sorg. Hy bly laag op die grond en hardloop so vinnig as wat hy kan totdat hy net 'n paar meter van die verdagtes af is. Hulle staan steeds met hulle rûe na hom, hulle fokus net op Clay.

“Polisie!” skree hy hard genoeg om bo die geraas van die wind en vuur om hulle gehoor te word.

Vir 'n paar sekondes staan die twee mans doodstil. Noudat Alex nader is, kan hy sien dat Uil een van die mans by Clay is, en dit lyk nie of hy gewapen is nie. Dit is die langer man wat die geweer teen Clay se rug hou. Alex skree harder. “Hande in die lug of ek sit my hond op jou!” Hy gee vir Bo 'n ander teken. Die hond begin woës blaf en maak harde gromgeluide.

Uil sit sy hande in die lug. Toe hy omdraai, kyk hy reguit in Alex se oë. Dit is duidelik dat hy hom herken, en hy skree vir die kaalkopman: “Hy het 'n geweer en 'n hond. Doen wat hy sê!”

Maar Uil se maat vuur 'n paar skote in Clay se rigting en net daarna draai hy om en rig sy geweer op Alex. Alex skiet net een skoot toe lê die verdagte op die grond, doodstil. Clay kreun van die pyn teen die motor en hou sy skouer vas. “Ek is oukei ... dit is net my arm!” skree hy. Alex is op die punt om vir Bo te wys om 'n ogie te hou oor Uil en die man op die grond sodat hy na sy vriend toe kan gaan, toe daar 'n beweging agter hom is.

Voordat hy sy geweer kan oorhaal, blaf Bo een keer en spring op 'n man in die skaduwees wat Alex nie eers gesien het nie. 'n Man wat hulle van agter af bekruip het en nou net 'n paar meter weg is. Met 'n wilde tweede blafgeluid spring Bo op die man en hulle val grond toe, en die man skiet een maal na Bo se bors.

“Nee!” Alex hou sy geweer in die lug, sy knieë lam. “Nee ... Bo, kom hier!”

Bo maak 'n geluid wat Alex hom nog nooit vantevore hoor maak het nie. Die man se geweer vlieg uit sy hand en Bo val grond toe. Alex haal vinnig asem en hyg. “Bo, kom hier, my hond!”

“Hy's geskiet.” Clay se stem kan bo die geraas gehoor word. “Kry die verdagte se wapen.”

Alex sien die geweer 'n paar meter van hom af. Hy gryp dit en druk dit in sy agtersak, maar sy oë bly op sy hond. Bo lê doodstil oor die verdagte se bors, sy vorstelike kop kyk in Alex se rigting. In daardie kort oomblik sien Alex iets in Bo se oë wat hy nog nie vantevore gesien het nie, iets wat vir hom sê dat die situasie baie ernstig is.

Bo se oë is vol vrees.

“Byt vas, Bo!”

Die verdagte se bril lê op die grond en hy stoot Bo van hom af om dit te soek. Alex wil vir hom skree, vir hom vra hoekom hy in die naam van omgewingsbewaring huise aan die brand steek en op polisiemanne skiet. Hy rig sy geweer op die man, maar die verdagte is nie meer gewapen nie.

“Moenie beweeg nie!” Alex bewe, desperaat om vir Bo te help. Dit verg baie

van hom om nie die sneller te trek nie, maar die verdagte doen soos hy gevra word. Hy staan stil en hou sy hande in die lug.

Alex kyk vinnig oor sy skouer en sien hoe Clay 'n T-hemp uit sy motor haal. "Help my gou." Hy waai in Alex se rigting. Uil staan steeds daar naby. Hy lyk geskok.

Bo maak nou tjankgeluide, 'n stadige, hartverskeurende kermgeluid. Om hulle woed die wind en vuur, en Alex sien dat nog twee huise aan die brand is as gevolg van vlamme wat vanaf die ander strukture gespring het. "Byt vas, Bo!" skree hy vir sy hond en hardloop na sy vriend toe met sy geweer steeds op die derde verdagte gerig.

Hy draai net lank genoeg om om die T-hemp by Clay te vat en dit net bo die skietwond aan sy boarm vas te bind. Die wond bloei, maar nie so erg dat dit lewensgevaarlik is nie. In elk geval nie op die oomblik nie, en die knelverband sal help. "Is jy oukei?" Alex se asem jaag. Hy trek die punte van die T-hemp styf en maak seker die druk is op die regte plek.

"Ek is oukei." Clay het baie seer, maar hy hanteer dit goed. Hy kyk met die straat af en skud sy kop. "Ons is in die moeilikheid, my vriend. Ons moet hier uitkom."

'n Vinnige kykie na die verdagte op die grond bevestig wat Alex gedink het. Die man is dood.

"Wat ... wat van die vuur?" skree Uil van waar hy staan, doodstil, doodbang.

"Moenie beweeg nie!" skree Alex vir hom. Maar voordat hy vir Clay kan agterlaat en die geweer weer op die derde verdagte kan rig, hardloop die man weg, met die straat af in die rigting van die skouhuis.

"Los hom!" Clay krimp inmekaar, hou sy arm teen sy lyf. "Bo het jou nodig." Alex voel naar toe hy na Bo kyk. Die hond beweeg glad nie, maar sy kop is steeds 'n paar sentimeter van die grond af, sy oë op Alex gerig soos vandat die skoot 'n paar minute gelede afgegaan het. Alex sit sy geweer terug in die pistoolsak en val op sy knieë langs sy hond neer. "Bo ... byt vas, my hond. Dis oukei." In die gloed van die straatlig kan hy die donker, nat sirkel sien wat vanuit Bo se harige bors loop.

Hy kan nie sien waar die koeël is nie, of dit uit die hond is en miskien net 'n wond gelos het wat behandel kan word nie, en of die besering erger is nie. Alex keer homself voor hy daaraan dink. Hy laat sak sy kop tot by Bo s'n en praat kalm by die hond se oor. "Dis oukei, Bo ... byt vas, my hond. Dis oukei." Toe Alex opstaan, draai Bo sy kop en lek Alex se hand. Soos vroeër is sy oë net op Alex gerig.

Alex kon nog altyd raai wat sy hond dink, en op die oomblik is dit weer die geval. Bo se oë spreek van liefde en lojaliteit wat nie in woorde uitgedruk kan word nie, omgee en bekommernis wat verder strek as sy begeerte om na sy eie belange om te sien. In sy oë kan Alex sien dat, ongeag wat gebeur, Bo weer dieselfde ding sal doen. 'n Koeël wat vir Alex bedoel was, het hom getref, en dit is iets wat Bo bereid was om te verduur van die eerste keer dat hulle begin saamwerk het.

Alex het nog nie eintlik gehuil sedert sy pa se dood nie. Die man wat hy voor die terroriste-aanvalle was, het tot laat daardie verskriklike Dinsdagaand oor sy pa gerou, maar daarna het hy sy pyn diep begrawe en sy vasberadenheid toegelaat om hom te dryf. Hy het vir seker 'n paar keer teen die trane geveg – soos toe hy vir Holly die laaste keer gegroet het. Maar hy het nie een keer gehuil nie.

Tot nou.

Met die trane warm teen sy wange tel hy sy hond op, staan op, en hardloop met hom na sy bakkie. Hy kyk na Clay en die aaklige gevoel op sy maag word erger. Sy vriend lyk nie goed nie. “Bly hier. Ek is nou terug,” skree hy.

“Wat van my?” Dit is Uil wat verskrik uitskree bo die geraas van die vuur en wind.

Alex gaan staan vir 'n oomblik stil en staar na die man deur die rook en gloeiende kole. “Bly net waar jy is.”

Clay is bleek en sy vel lyk klammerig. Hy leun teen sy motor en maak sy oë toe. Alex hoor die geluid van 'n helikopter bo die geraas van die vuur en dan besef hy wat besig is om te gebeur. Water val op die vuur. Dit sal help, maar die ontwikkeling is reeds 'n vuurpoel.

Alex hardloop so vinnig as wat hy kan met Bo na sy bakkie en sit hom versigtig op die agterste sitplek neer. “Komaan, Bo ... jy kan dit doen.” Hy sê die woorde so kalm as wat hy kan, want Bo kan uit sy stemtoon agterkom as daar moeilikheid is. Die hond het nog altyd 'n goeie waarnemingsvermoë gehad, en op die oomblik moet hy glo dat Alex dink hy gaan bly leef. En Alex dink wel so. Hy weier om anders daaroor te dink. Natuurlik gaan Bo bly leef. Hy gaan nie doodgaan nie. Hy het die afgelope paar minute oorleef, nou moet hulle hom net by 'n veearts kry.

Alex ry met sy bakkie vanuit sy wegkruipplek en jaag tot waar Clay steeds teen sy motor leun. Alex klim uit en hardloop so gou hy kan na Clay toe en loop met hom na die passasiersitplek waar hy hom inhelp.

“Jy!” skree hy vir Uil. “Klim agterin!”

Uil hoef nie twee keer genooi te word nie. Hy beur vorentoe en spring agterop die bakkie.

Alex klim weer agter die stuurwiel in en kyk na Clay. “Byt vas.”

“Hoe ... hoe gaan ons ... deur die vuur kom?” Clay lê teen die sitplek, sukkel om sy oë oop te hou. “Alles brand.”

“Ek weet van 'n ander pad.” Alex kyk in die straat af. Clay is reg. Die vuur woed nou oor die hoofpad van die ontwikkeling, en beweeg nader aan die skouhuis. Maar dit maak nie saak nie. Hulle moet op die een of ander manier daardeur kom, want aan die ander kant van die vlamme sal die vuurpad steeds 'n veilige manier wees om met die heuwel af te gaan.

Alex trek weg en praat gou oor die radio – een verdagte dood, een gevang, die ander een het weggekom. “Ek het twee slagoffers – Michaels en my hond.” Hy verduidelik dat hy nou met die vuurpad, wat ongeveer agt honderd meter van Oak Canyon se ingang is, gaan afbeweeg. Sy woorde is skerp en vinnig.

“Ek het ’n paar ambulanse nodig.”

“Tien-vier. Stop by die skouhuis. Die vrou wat die oproep gemaak het, is steeds daar. Sy is deur die vuur vasgevang, net soos sersant Michaels.”

Alex kyk na Clay en dan oor sy skouer na Bo. Op hierdie stadium is elke oomblik kosbaar – vir albei van hulle. Maar as daar ’n vrou vasgevang is in die huis, sal hy haar moet gaan red. Hy kyk na die vuur voor hom, besin oor hoe erg dit is, en sien dan ’n motor wat buite die huis geparkeer staan. Hy het nie die motor raakgesien toe hy die eerste keer daar verby is nie. Dit is seker die vrou s’n.

Alex vee oor sy oë. Hy moet ophou huil. Hy kan nie nou ineens stort nie, nie noudat hy so baie het om te doen nie. Hy kyk weer terug na Bo, en selfs nou kyk Bo na hom, byna of hy om verskoning vra, asof hy steeds wil help maar sy lyf dit nie langer toelaat nie. Dan kyk Alex na sy vriend. “Is jy nog met my, Michaels?”

“Ek haal asem.” Clay klink of hy aan die slaap is, duiselig. Hy verloor steeds bloed en hy moet vinnig by die hospitaal kom. Maar Alex moet eers die vrou red. “Ek moet eers na die skouhuis toe gaan. Hulle sê die vrou wat gebel het, is steeds daarbinne.”

“Gaan.” Clay lig sy hand van die arm wat nie geskiet is nie, sy stem ’n bietjie sterker as vroeër. “Ek sal oukei wees.”

Alex ry tot byna teen die huis se voordeur, spring uit en hou sy geweer in die lug. Hy kan nie te versigtig wees nie. Die ander verdagte het in hierdie rigting gehardloop, en hy het dalk nog ’n geweer by hom. Hy het vandag alreeds nie aan die moontlikheid van nog ’n verdagte gedink nie. Hy hardloop na die voordeur toe en probeer dit oopmaak, maar dit is gesluit. Hy slaan met die agterkant van sy geweer teen die deur. “Polisie ... is enigiemand hier?” Hy verwag dat sy teen hierdie tyd al op die een of ander manier ontsnap en met die straat af in die rigting van die vuurpad gehardloop het, met die wete dat haar motor ook brand. Die ontwikkelaar het darem sekerlik vir sy werknemers van die alternatiewe roete vertel.

Hy is op die punt om die deur af te skop en die plek te deursoek – net vir ingeval die een of ander ROA-lid die vrou gyselaar hou – toe die deur skielik oopgaan en ’n vrou verwilderd uitkom. “Ek het gedink hulle het vergeet – ” Sy bly dadelik stil, uit die veld geslaan.

Vir ’n lang ruk kan Alex niks anders doen as om na haar te staar nie. Hy is te geskok om enigiets te doen of te dink en probeer slegs sin maak van wat hy sien.

“Alex?” Sy is verward, verskrik. “Ek ... ” sy kyk oor haar skouer. “Ek het nie geweet of dit veilig is om uit te kom nie en ... ”

“Holly, is dit jy ... is dit jy wat gebel het?”

“Ja.” Sy bewee. “Ek werk hier.”

Hy probeer weer fokus op die feit dat die situasie ernstig is. “Is jy alleen hier?”

“Ja. Hulle het weggebly van die skouhuis af.” Sy loop uit, en op daardie

oomblik sien sy seker vir die eerste keer hoe groot die brand is. Sy sit haar hand oor haar mond. “Die vuur ... dit is oral!”

Nog ’n helikopter kom nader en laat val ’n vag water op die deel van die pad waar Alex moet deurgaen om na die vuurpad te ry. “Kom.” Hy sit sy geweer terug en gryp haar hand. “Ons moet hier wegkom.”

Hy kan nie al sy gevoelens verwerk nie. Holly Brooks werk by Oak Canyon Estates? Hy het die plek al soveel keer besoek en in hierdie straat afgery, en nooit het hy geweet dat sy –

Daar is nog ’n ontploffing agter hulle en die huis langs die skouhuis slaan aan die brand. Die wind waai brandende kooltjies in alle rigtings. Dit is dus net ’n kwessie van tyd voor die skouhuis ook gaan begin brand. Hy hardloop met Holly na sy bakkie en help haar om langs Bo op die agterste sitplek in te klim. “My hond is geskiet.” Hy kyk vir ’n oomblik na haar en hy weet sy sal die pyn in sy oë kan voel. Sy lyk nog steeds dieselfde, soos die Holly wat hy as seun geken en liefgehad het. Sy knik effens toe sy in die bakkie klim, asof sy sê sy sal die hond help as daar iets is wat sy kan doen.

Toe hy weer agter die stuurwiel is, sit Alex sy hand op Clay se knie. “Praat met my, Clay. Is jy nog oukei?”

“Ek moet ... by ’n dokter uitkom.”

“Ons is op pad.” Alex veg teen die gevoelens wat skielik in hom opgekom het toe hy in Holly se oë gekyk het. Die ROA gaan nie vir Clay of Bo, of vir hom of Holly doodmaak solank Alex dit kan verhelp nie. Hy sit sy bakkie in trurat, en die oomblik toe die bakkie in die regte rigting kyk, trek hy weg. “Hou vas, julle.”

Van agter op die bakkie skree Uil vreesbevange. Die vuurvingers wat oor die straat voor hulle waai, is nou minder, maar oor die grootpad staan die vlamme steeds vyf meter hoog. Alex byt op sy tande en trap die petrolpedaal plat. Die bakkie bars deur die hitte en donker- oranje vlamme tot in die straat daaragter. Eers toe asem Alex uit.

Hy kyk in die truspieëltjie. Uil hou sy hande oor sy kop, maar hy het niks oorgekom nie. Hulle het dit reggekry; hulle is deur die vuur. Toe sien hy die derde verdagte aan die kant van die pad. Hy waai vir hulle, sy gesig vol vrees. Alex vertrou nie die man nie. Hy sal moet terugkom om hom te kry. Alex was reg oor die vuurpad voor hulle. Daar is geen vuur wat dié pad versper nie. Daar is ’n paar huise aan die regterkant wat brand, en die vuur strek af met die heuwel, weg van die vuurpad.

Hulle bereik die einde van die straat en hy skakel sy bakkie oor na vierwielaangedrewe. Toe kyk hy terug na Holly, maar sy sit vooroor gebuig, vryf Bo se sy, fluister vir hom, vertroos hom. Alex kyk reguit voor hom en sluk aan nog trane. Hy sal hulle hier uitkry, want hy moet hulle na veiligheid neem. Hy stuur sy bakkie oor die rowwe terrein tussen die ontwikkeling en die vuurpad, en toe hy op die nou grondpaadjie is, jaag hy so vinnig hy kan met die heuwel af.

Aan die onderkant van die pad wag ’n hele klomp noodvoertuie. Hy ry in

hulle rigting en slaan remme aan 'n paar meter van die eerste ambulans en 'n groep paramedici met 'n draagbaar. Alex sluit die bakkie af en spring uit. Hy moet eers vir Clay help. Hy waai vir die paramedici om na die passasiersitplek te gaan, en een van hulle is voor hom daar. "My hond!" skree Alex vir van die ander paramedici naby die tweede ambulans. "Hy is agterin."

Twee van hulle hardloop met nog 'n draagbaar na die bakkie. Terselfdertyd kom nog twee na Clay toe aangehardloop met 'n draagbaar en, net toe Alex langs Clay is, maak sy vriend sy oë oop. "Haai ... dankie." Sy mond klink droog, en hy lyk moeg en bleek. "Kan nie glo ... jy het ons daar uitgekry nie. Die hele heuwel ... is aan die brand." Hy kyk terug na die bakkie. "Ek is oukei." Hy bly vir 'n oomblik stil, haal moeiliker asem as voorheen. "Gaan na Bo toe."

'n Paar SWAT-lede haal Uil agter van die bakkie af, en Alex skree vir hulle: "Die derde verdagte is nog daarbo."

"Ons sal op die uitkyk wees vir hom," skree een van hulle. "Maar dis te gevaarlik om terug te gaan."

Alex staan terug, in twee geskeur. Die paramedici het vir Clay 'n drup aangesit en is reeds besig om sy toestand te monitor. Alex kyk vir die eerste medikus. Die man knik in sy rigting en sê daardeur vir hom wat hy wil weet. Clay gaan dit maak, hulle het die voet van die heuwel betyds bereik.

"Gaan na Bo toe," Clay klink so ernstig as wat hy kan.

Alex knik. Hy draai om en hardloop na die ander kant van sy bakkie waar 'n paar mense Bo versigtig optel en op 'n draagbaar sit. Holly is steeds by hom. Sy leun bo-oor Bo, haar lang hare hang langs sy sy terwyl sy sy kop en ore vryf.

Alex kyk vinnig na haar. "Dankie."

Sy sê niks nie, sit net haar hand voor haar mond. Dit is toe dat hy sien sy huil. Hy het nie tyd om aan haar hartseer te dink nie, oor hoekom sy huil en of dit is oor Bo of oor hom of omdat hulle byna dood is in die vuur nie. Al wat nou saak maak, is Bo. Alex beweeg nader aan die draagbaar, en Holly staan terug om vir hom plek te maak.

"Haai, Bo ... alles is oukei. Ek is hier." Bo se oë is toe en hy beweeg nie. Alex sit sy hand op die hond se kop, en toe hy Alex se stem hoor en voel dat hy aan hom raak, maak Bo sy oë oop en kyk reguit na Alex. Hy probeer sy kop lig, maar hierdie keer sukkel hy.

'n Medikus is besig om vir hom 'n drup aan te sit. Hy hoor die twee mans fluister en toe hy regop kom, is sy stem ernstig. "Hy gaan dit maak, nê?"

Hulle kyk na mekaar en Alex wil skree. Die medikus by die voetenent van die draagbaar haal sy skouers op. "Ons vat hom na die dierehospitaal in Calabasas. Ons sal alles doen wat ons kan."

Alex gryp die een man se arm vas. "Hy gaan oukei wees. Hy sou nou al doodgebloei het as die koeël ernstige skade aangerig het."

Die ander medikus begin die draagbaar stoot. "Ons moet nou gaan. Kom jy saam met ons?"

Skielik is Alex weer in twee geskeur. Die man wat vir Bo geskiet het, is steeds daarbo, besig om sonder sy bril rond te hardloop in die vuur. Die SWAT-lede is reg as hulle sê dit is gevaarlik om weer op te gaan. Maar wat as die man wegkom? Hy sal vry wees totdat hulle weer 'n ontmoetingsplek kry en nog 'n paar lede. Volgende keer as die wind waai, sal hulle by 'n ander ontwikkeling 'n brand stig, bereid om mense dood te maak oor die een of ander radikale siek begeerte om die omgewing te bewaar. Of die man kan in die vuur sterf. Dan gaan Alex met sy gewete moet saamleef, aangesien hy weet hy het die man langs die pad gelos omdat hy te haastig was om Clay en Bo na veiligheid te bring.

Die ambulans met Clay binne-in trek weg. Die sirenes dra by tot die geraas van die onverbiddelike wind en die vuur wat aan die ander kant van die heuwel woed. Alex kan weer die dringendheid voel, hoe dit hom na sy bakkie toe dwing. Bo gaan oukei wees. Hulle gaan hom dierehospitaal toe vat en die koeël verwyder, vir hom steke gee en 'n drup. Hy móét net oukei wees. Alex loop langs die draagbaar en kyk hoe hulle hom agter in die ambulans in stoot. Dan klim hy agterin en sit so na aan Bo as wat hy kan, maar weer is Bo se oë toe.

“Ons het vir hom iets vir die pyn gegee,” sê een van die mans. “Hy sal oor 'n minuut of twee vas aan die slaap wees.”

Alex knik, maar hy kyk nie na die man nie. Pynstillers is 'n goeie idee. 'n Baie goeie idee. Laat Bo maar slaap. Hy het rus nodig ná alles wat hy deurgemaak het. 'n Medikus klim in die ambulans in aan die ander kant van Bo. Hy kyk na die drup en spuit nog medikasie in die sakkie.

“Bo ...” Alex voel nou paniekerig. “Kan jy my hoor, Bo?”

Die hond se ooglede beweeg effens en gaan dan oop. Sy oë lyk helderder as voorheen, en die vrees van vroeër is weg. Vir 'n lang ruk – Alex is nie seker of dit vir 'n minuut of vyf is nie – kyk Bo na hom. Hy knip nie sy oë nie, kyk ook nie weg nie. Vandat hulle begin saamwerk het, het Alex Bo nog nooit hartseer gesien nie, maar hy is nou. Sy oë is vol verdriet, te diep om die einde daarvan te sien.

“Jy gaan oukei wees, my hond.” Alex voel 'n knop in sy keel, en hy sluk hard, stry daarteen. “Jy is 'n goeie hond, Bo.” Alex vryf oor die hond se kop. “So 'n goeie hond, Bo.”

“Ons moet nou gaan.” Die medikus wat buite die ambulans staan, slaan teen die oop deur.

Alex hou sy hand in die lug en sy oë op die hond. Die medisyne is seker besig om te werk, want Bo knip sy oë 'n paar keer, baie stadig. Toe dit lyk of hy amper slaap, baklei hy nog 'n laaste keer om sy oë oop te maak. En dan maak hy dit vir die laaste keer toe, die medisyne te sterk vir hom.

“Oubaas se hond.” Alex laat rus sy hond se kop in sy arms en hou hom vir 'n rukkie vas. “Jy gaan oukei wees.” Hy druk sy gesig teen Bo s'n en laat lê hom weer op die draagbaar. As daar nog een ding is wat hy moet doen, is dit om die verdagte te kry. Maar hy wil nie hê Bo moet alleen hospitaal toe ry nie.

Alex onthou van Holly en toe hy uit die ambulans klim, draai hy na haar toe. “Kan jy saam met hom gaan? Vir ingeval hy wakker word?” Hy praat vinnig. Vrees oorweldig hom, maak nie saak of hy wil glo dat Bo gaan leef nie.

“Ja.” Sy vee die trane van haar wange af terwyl sy vinnig in die rigting van die ambulans loop.

“Jy weet,” Alex staan eenkant toe sodat sy kan inklim, “sodat hy nie bang is nie?”

“Natuurlik.” Sy gaan sit waar Alex gesit het en begin Bo se kop en sy vryf. “Hoekom gaan jy nie saam nie?”

Hy voel hoe die kyk in sy oë hard word. “Daar is nog iets wat ek moet doen.”

“Alex ... ” haar gesigsuitdrukking verander. Daar is skok in haar oë. “Jy gaan nie weer boontoe nie, of hoe? Die vuur ... ”

“Ek móét.” Hy staan terug. “Ek sal jou by die hospitaal kry so gou ek kan.” Hy kyk vir ’n laaste keer na Bo en dan na haar, staar vir ’n lang ruk in haar blou oë. “Dankie.”

Die ander medikus is alreeds agter die stuurwiel, gereed om te ry. Alex maak die deur toe en aarsel net vir ’n paar sekondes toe die ambulans ’n U-draai maak en in die rigting van die deurpad ry. ’n Paar SWAT-motors staan nog daar rond, en toe Alex terughardloop na sy bakkie toe, skree een van hulle vir hom: “Waarheen gaan jy?”

“Daar is nog ’n verdagte daarbo. Iemand moet hom vang.”

“Nie jy nie, Brady. Jy gaan nie bystand hê nie,” sê Joe.

“Ek gee nie om nie.” Hy is al klaar in sy bakkie. Hy wil nie hoor wat Joe dalk volgende gaan sê nie. Hy gaan nie die bevale verontagsaam nie, maar hy moet dit eers hoor om dit na te kom. En op die oomblik luister hy nie.

Alex voel of hy ’n doel het toe hy met die bakkie die heuwel op ry, toe hy om die draaie en op die smal paadjie ruk en gly. Hy het homself belowe dat niemand gaan sterf as gevolg van die brande wat deur die ROA gestig is nie, en daar is reeds een verdagte dood. Maar daar gaan nie nog een sterf nie, nie as hy en die hele hoofkantoor geweet het dit gaan gebeur nie. Dit is nie soos 11 September toe die land nie geweet het van die terroriste-aanvalle nie. Hierdie keer het hulle geweet, en miskien het hulle nie genoeg gedoen om dit te keer nie. Hoe dit ook al sy, niemand anders gaan sterf nie, nie vanaand nie. Daarvoor sal hy sorg.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Holly braced herself against the back of the ambulance so she could keep one hand on Bo for the ride to the veterinarian hospital. But as she patted the sleeping dog's side and his head, she was completely absorbed in the task of trying to process what had happened over the last hour. She'd done what she could do ... she had no doubt about that. She'd made the call to 9-1-1 as soon as she had even the slightest clue that something bad was happening.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. The estates were gone. Completely gone. Dave Jacobs had insurance, and if he could afford the deductible maybe he'd build again, or maybe not. Either way, her job was no longer a certainty. She had called Ron after she called the police, but by the time he arrived on the scene no one was allowed up. Ron had called her just once to see how bad the situation was. "The houses, are they ... how many are burning?"

"They're gone, Ron. The whole neighborhood's on fire."

In the course of their conversation, she wished she were talking to Dave and not Ron. Someone who might be concerned with her safety. Because Ron definitely seemed more concerned with the buildings than with her, and she knew for sure that she and Ron were finished.

The ambulance bounced and jerked as the driver made his way to the freeway. Holly pictured herself waiting in the dark real estate office for someone to come help her. Early on after the first fires were started, she thought about sneaking out, maybe driving down the dirt road to the guard station and checking in with the officers who were there. But she didn't know if she could make it to her car without attracting attention from the men setting the fires.

Then someone from the sheriff's dispatch called her and ordered her to leave. "You're in grave danger up there," the woman told her.

"What about the arsonists?" Holly had been sitting low at her desk in total darkness, watching fires start at each end of the street.

The dispatcher explained that a SWAT officer was headed up, that he'd make

the arrests, and that whether the suspects saw her or not she needed to leave. Holly agreed, but as she hung up, she watched in horror as the fire jumped from the corner house to the brush across the street, closing off the road and trapping her. Trapping all of them. Her next call to 9-1-1 was more urgent, filled with panic.

“What am I supposed to do? Everything’s burning up here.”

“Stay calm. Is the house you’re in on fire?”

“No.” Her heart slammed around inside her. “But the wind ... it’s blowing the fire in every direction.”

“Stay put as long as you can. Call if anything changes. We’ll have someone come get you as soon as we can.”

The next fifteen minutes were the longest in her life. Holly opened her eyes and studied the dog again. The ambulance was getting off the freeway, heading down an off-ramp.

“It won’t be long,” the medic’s eyes looked deeply concerned.

“He’s not doing well, is he?” Her voice was thick with tears, and she could barely talk.

“No.” He frowned and patted the soft fur around Bo’s ears. “He’s hurt pretty bad.”

Holly sighed and let her forehead rest in her hand. In her wildest dreams, she hadn’t imagined the person who would rescue her would be Alex Brady. But seeing him only confirmed what she had wondered about before. She hadn’t stopped loving him, not even a little. She would always remember the way he looked on the doorstep of the model home, his eyes wide and worried, features drawn and tense. And then the change in his expression, the half a second when the walls came down and she could see clearly what she’d always believed.

That the Alex she loved was still inside him somewhere. The young man he’d once been had risen to the surface instantly in the shock of seeing her at the door. Just as quickly, the walls were up again, but that was understandable. They had been in the middle of an emergency, a disaster that could’ve wound up very differently. She patted Bo’s side, a couple of long, soft pats. Poor dog. The disaster was still playing out around them. And what about Alex? Holly’s heart fluttered about inside her, its rhythm nowhere near normal. Alex was crazy to go back up the hill. The winds could shift at any moment, and the fire would tear down the other side of the development, right across the fire road.

The ambulance turned onto a busy street and sped onto a straightaway.

“The staff knows we’re coming.” The medic was focused on Bo. “They’ll be ready for him.”

“Thanks.” She sniffed twice. Tears slipped onto her cheeks, and she pressed her finger beneath her nose. What was Alex thinking? He should’ve stayed with his dog and let another deputy get the suspect. The guy couldn’t go anywhere trapped in the fire, so why chase after him? She felt a series of sobs building inside her. The answer was as obvious as it was painful. He had to go for the same reason he’d pushed her out of his life. Because he was driven to save lives — even the life of a bad guy. Every life but his own.

Another wave of tears filled her eyes. Watching him tonight, she realized for the first time that he was right. She couldn’t have been in a relationship with someone that driven, that focused on solving crime and saving lives. The terrorist attacks had changed him, and this was the result: Alex’s crazy determination to keep other people from going through what he went through, so that no one else would have to be the victim of the attacks of another.

A victim like Alex still was.



He found the suspect trying to get away, stumbling down the hill at the top of the fire road, a wet rag pressed to his mouth. The sight of him assured Alex he’d done the right thing by coming back up. The guy could be killed trying to escape the fire on foot, and if he did make it out, he’d probably be back at his acts of ecoterrorism by next week.

Alex flipped his bright lights on the guy and drew his gun. The suspect froze and raised his hands over his head. Alex ran out, grabbed him, read him his rights, and shoved him into the bed of his Dodge. He didn’t have handcuffs, but he wasn’t worried about the guy fleeing. Not with his life on the line. Wasting no time, Alex slid back into the driver’s seat and hurried up the hill to turn around.

At the same time, he realized what was happening with the firestorm. The wind had shifted, and a towering wave of fire was coming their direction. Alex whipped the truck around as soon as it was physically possible. From the back, the bald guy must’ve seen the fire coming toward them because he shouted, “Faster!”

Alex tried not to look, tried to stay focused on the road ahead of him because he had to make it down the hill, had to turn the last suspect over to SWAT,

and get to the vet hospital. Had to make it back to Bo, back to tell Holly he was grateful for the way she had been there for Bo.

Still he couldn't help but see what was happening.

The fire was spilling down the back side of the canyon at a wicked speed, consuming the brush like a voracious monster and creating an inferno that was now just twenty yards ahead of Alex's truck, pressing its way downhill and edging in on the fire road ahead. He would have to hurry if he was going to make it. Once the fire crossed the road, it would be a sea of flames impossible to drive through.

He gave the truck a little more gas, but as he did, his rear left wheel nearly slid off the narrow road. Alex had to let up on the pedal until he could steer the truck back onto the gravel, and those few seconds were all it took. Ahead, the fire roared across the road and back up the hill on the other side. Before Alex could think of a plan or put his truck in reverse, the flames crossed the road a dozen yards behind him.

"We're surrounded!" The suspect shrieked.

Alex was breathing hard, looking first over his right shoulder, then his left. There had to be an escape. He could drive off the fire road if he had to — at least they'd have some sort of chance that way. But the inferno raged on all fronts, every side, and Alex wondered for an instant if this was what hell felt like, trapped by a mountain of fire with no escape. They were going to die, so maybe he was about to find out, and it occurred to him that Clay was right about the Bible verse. There was a way that seemed right to him, and he'd done that very thing. But in the end it really was going to lead to death.

He hit the brakes and tried to imagine running through the flames or maybe crawling under them. But there wasn't a single space surrounding him that wasn't on fire. He gripped the steering wheel, his heart pounding, his breathing fast and panicky as he reached for the radio. "Brady, here. I'm trapped on the fire road. Flames all around us. I need some help here, guys. Send a helicopter, and hurry."

The flames were closing in, so that they were stuck in a circle maybe thirty yards in diameter and getting smaller with every second, every gust of wind. This was really the end. He could still do one thing, so Alex opened the door and shouted at the suspect. "Get inside the truck. Hurry!"

The tall thin suspect vaulted out of the bed and slid into the backseat, brushing tiny fiery embers from his hair. Gone was the cocky attitude, the larger-than-life bad guy who had shot a bullet through Alex's dog. The suspect was a quivering mass of terror. "Listen ... you gotta get us out of here!"

“We’re stuck.” Alex didn’t look back at him, didn’t bother to raise his voice. He shut his door and stared at the flames.

In the backseat the suspect was going ballistic now, shouting for him to do something, to drive through the flames, or let him out of the truck. Screaming how they needed to say their prayers, and how he was going to run down the mountainside if Alex didn’t do something.

“Go ... you won’t get far.” Alex leaned his forehead on the steering wheel and tuned him out. They were both going to die, and that meant he’d never know about Bo, never see Holly Brooks again. Never have the chance to thank her and tell her what he knew for sure now.

That his love for her had never died, no matter how he’d tried to suffocate it.

He opened his eyes and felt a burst of the fight that was so familiar to him. Maybe he *could* drive through the flames and make it out on the other side. He’d done that once tonight already, so why not at least try? But the fire ahead wasn’t a thin wall this time; it was an ocean of flames, an inferno. They’d get a few feet in, his truck would explode, and that would be that.

He never should have come back up the hill after the suspect. If the guy had been killed in the fire, it would’ve been his own fault. Alex wasn’t responsible, and eventually the guy would’ve been caught — by fire or by the SWAT team when he came down — just like Joe had said. Joe had warned him not to come up here again. So Alex would die because of his own stubbornness, his determination to do things his way. That’s what would kill him in the end — just like the Bible verse had said. Alex looked over his shoulder again and saw what he already knew. The flames were closer now, the circle shrinking.

But to sit here and wait for certain death went against everything Alex knew. Suddenly, he remembered what the suspect had said a few seconds ago. How they needed to say their prayers ... Whether the guy meant it or not didn’t matter. If Alex was going to die in the next few minutes, he had no choice but to talk to God — the God he’d walked away from seven years ago.

Whether it was the fire closing in on him or some divine act of the Holy Spirit, Alex wasn’t sure, but in that moment he could finally see with clarity that his father hadn’t died because of God’s callousness. He died because it was his time, and in a heartbeat he went from the horror of 9/11 to the hallways of heaven. His father never would’ve blamed God, and now Alex couldn’t blame Him either. Not for one more minute.

He opened the truck door, adrenaline flooding his veins, making it almost impossible to breathe or think or feel anything but overwhelming panic. The

wind and burning embers gusted overhead, igniting bushes in the shrinking circle that surrounded his truck. The bad guy was still in the back screaming at him, begging him to do something, but there was nothing he could do.

It hit him then that this must be similar to how his father had felt in the moments before his death, trapped by a wall of flames with no way out, knowing that the fire had been set by terrorists. The difference was that his father had gone out with God at his side. Alex had no doubt about that.

So why couldn't he cry out to God even here, minutes before his death? His father had wanted Alex to be a man of faith more than anything else, but all these years he'd refused to think about that. Alex clenched his fists and tried to focus above the roar of the inferno around him. He could almost hear his dad calling to him, telling him to reach out to God — before it was too late.

Alex crouched down beneath the swirling fog of smoke and for a few seconds — like the suspect — he thought about running. But there was nowhere to go. Then, without giving the act another thought, he dropped to his knees. The small gravel and rocks dug into his knees through his jeans, but he didn't care.

"God!" The cry was desperate as it rose above the sound of the firestorm. "I'm sorry!" He shouted the words, but the fire and wind were so loud even he could barely hear them. He had blamed God and in the process he'd lost the life his father had wanted for him. He'd shut out everyone who loved him, and he'd tried to be God, the sort of Almighty he thought God should be. But he could see it all now, the fact that Clay was right. With Christ's strength, the only evil that could ever be conquered was the evil within him.

He lifted his hands and face to the fiery sky. "Help me, God! I'm not ready to die! Please ... forgive me."

A release exploded in his heart and soul, and like a scene from long ago he recognized the feelings, because they were the ones that had defined him before 9/11. Feelings of love and hope and longing, a desire for the kind of life his parents had shared. A favorite Bible verse from long ago came rushing back — *For I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength*. He'd shared it with Holly one day when the world was his and summer lasted all year long. And suddenly in the midst of the gravest danger he'd ever faced, it was all there again, flooding over him. *Thank You, God ... I feel You here with me*.

He could do this, because with every breath Christ was giving him a strength he hadn't known these past seven years. Alex remembered something his father had told him. That there was a party in heaven whenever one sinner turned back to God. Alex smiled despite the terror around him. *Let my dad be part of the celebration, God ... I see it so clearly. Thank You ...*

He could almost hear the band.

But even as he prayed, the fire moved in closer, sucking the air from the small pocket and making it hard to breathe. Alex wasn't afraid, wasn't panicked anymore. He didn't want to die, but there was no way out. The end could be any moment now, the next gust of wind and the raging inferno would close in on top of them. Alex stayed on his knees and thought again of Bo and Holly and his mom. At least he'd had the chance to tell his mother he was sorry. The heat of the flames was suffocating now, and Alex had a final thought — something good would come from him dying this way.

In a matter of minutes, he would see his dad again.

Hoofstuk 27

Holly druk teen die agterkant van die ambulans sodat sy een hand op Bo kan hou terwyl hulle na die dierehospitaal toe ry. Maar terwyl sy die slapende hond se kop en sy vryf, is sy totaal vasgevang in 'n poging om te probeer verwerk wat die afgelope uur gebeur het. Sy het gedoen wat sy kon ... daarvoor twyfel sy nie. Die oomblik toe sy gedink het dat iets verkeerd is, het sy 911 gebel.

Sy leun terug met haar kop en maak haar oë toe. Die landgoed is daarmee heen. Heeltemal weg. Dave Jacobs het versekering, en as hy dit kan bekostig, sal hy dalk weer begin bou, of miskien nie. Maak nie saak wat gebeur nie, sy gaan nie meer werk hê nie. Sy het vir Ron gebel nadat sy die polisie gebel het, maar teen die tyd wat hy by die toneel opgedaag het, mag niemand meer opgegaan het nie. Ron het haar net een keer gebel om te hoor hoe ernstig die situasie is. “Die huise, is hulle ... hoeveel is besig om te brand?”

“Hulle is weg, Ron. Die hele ontwikkeling brand.”

Terwyl hulle met mekaar gepraat het, het sy gewens sy praat eerder met Dave, nie met Ron nie. Iemand wat dalk bekommerd is oor haar veiligheid. Want Ron was vir seker meer bekommerd oor die huise as oor haar, en sy was seker daarvan dat sy en Ron nie 'n toekoms het nie.

Die ambulans ruk en skud terwyl die bestuurder in die rigting van die deurpad ry. Holly stel haar voor hoe sy in die donker skouhuis gewag het vir iemand om haar te kom help. Vroeër, toe die eerste brande uitgebreek het, het sy daaraan gedink om uit te glip, miskien met die grondpad af te ry na die sekuriteitstasie, ná die polisie wat daar was. Maar sy het nie geweet of sy tot by haar motor sou kom sonder om die brandstigters se aandag te trek nie.

Toe het iemand van die polisie haar gebel en beveel om die toneel te verlaat.

“Jy is in groot gevaar daarbo,” het die vrou vir haar gesê.

“Wat van die brandstigters?” Holly het in die donker agter haar lessenaar gesit en gekyk hoe die vure die een ná die ander in die straat begin brand.

Die vrou het verduidelik dat 'n SWAT-offisier op pad boontoe is, dat hy hulle sal vang, en of die verdagtes haar nou sien of nie, sy moet daar wegkom. Holly het saamgestem, maar toe sy die telefoon neersit, het sy geskok toegekyk hoe die vuur van die hoekhuis na die veld oorkant die straat spring, die pad versper en haar vaskeer. Hulle almal vaskeer. Haar volgende oproep aan 911 was dringender, sy was paniekbevange.

“Wat is ek veronderstel om te doen? Alles hierbo brand.”

“Bly kalm. Is die huis waarin jy is al aan die brand?”

“Nee.” Haar hart het wild geklop. “Maar die wind ... dit waai die vuur in alle rigtings.”

“Bly daar solank jy kan. Bel as iets verander. Sodra ons kan, sal ons iemand opstuur om jou te red.”

Die volgende vyftien minute was die langste van haar lewe. Holly maak haar oë oop en kyk weer na die hond. Die ambulans verlaat die deurpad, neem 'n afrit.

“Dit gaan nie lank wees nie,” die medikus se oë lyk baie bekommerd.

“Dit gaan nie goed met hom nie, of hoe?” Haar stem klink hartseer en sy kan byna nie praat nie.

“Nee.” Hy frons en vryf die sagte pels om Bo se ore. “Hy het baie seergekry.”

Holly sug en laat rus haar kop in haar een hand. In haar wildste drome sou sy haar nie kon voorstel dat die persoon wat haar red Alex Brady sou wees nie. Maar om hom te sien het bevestig waaroor sy voorheen gewonder het. Sy het nooit opgehou om vir hom lief te wees nie, nie eens 'n klein bietjie nie. Sy sal nooit vergeet hoe hy gelyk het daar voor die skouhuis se deur nie, sy oë wild en bekommerd, gespanne. En toe het sy gesigsuitdrukking vir 'n oomblik verander toe die mure inmekaarstort, en sy kon sien wat sy nog altyd geglo het.

Dat die Alex wat sy liefgehad het steeds iewers in hom is. Die jong man wat hy eens op 'n tyd was, het onmiddellik na die oppervlak gekom toe hy geskok sien sy staan by die deur. Net so gou het die mure weer sterk gestaan, maar dis te verstane. Hulle was midde-in 'n noodgeval, 'n ramp wat baie anders kon uitdraai. Sy vryf 'n paar keer lank en sag oor Bo se sy. Arme hond. Die ramp is steeds besig om af te speel. En wat van Alex? Holly se hart klop wild, heeltemal uit ritme. Alex is gek om weer met die heuwel op te gaan. Die wind kan enige oomblik in 'n ander rigting waai, en dan sal die vuur die ander kant van die ontwikkeling verteer, die vuurpad versper.

Die ambulans draai tot in 'n besige straat en versnel dan onmiddellik.

“Hulle weet ons kom.” Die medikus se aandag is by Bo. “Hulle sal gereed wees om hom te help.”

“Dankie.” Sy snuif twee keer. Die trane rol oor haar wange, en sy hou haar vinger onder haar neus. Wat dink Alex? Hy moes by sy hond gebly het sodat 'n ander polisieman die verdagte gaan vang. Die man kan nêrens heen gaan nie aangesien hy vasgekeer word deur die vuur. So hoekom wil hy hom agternajaag? Sy voel hoe die hartseer in haar opstoot. Die antwoord is

duidelik maar pynlik. Hy moes teruggaan vir dieselfde rede as wat hy haar uit sy lewe gestoot het. Want hy word daardeur gedryf om lewens te red – selfs die lewe van ’n misdadiger. Elke lewe behalwe sy eie.

Haar oë skiet weer vol tranes. Toe sy vanaand na hom gekyk het, het sy vir die eerste keer besef hy was reg. Sy kan nie ’n verhouding hê met iemand wat so vasberade is nie, wat daarop gefokus is om misdade op te los en lewens te red nie. Die terroriste-aanvalle het hom verander, en dit is die resultaat: Alex se fanatiese vasberadenheid om ander mense daarvan te red om te ervaar wat hy ervaar het, sodat niemand anders die slagoffer sal wees van iemand anders se aanvalle nie.

’n Slagoffer soos Alex steeds is.

★

Hy kry die verdagte waar hy probeer vlug, waar hy bo by die vuurpad met die heuwel af struikel terwyl hy ’n nat sak teen sy mond druk. Toe hy hom sien, weet Alex hy het die regte ding gedoen om weer boontoe te kom. Die man kan doodgaan as hy te voet van die vuur probeer vlug, en as hy dit wel oorleef, sal hy waarskynlik volgende week weer met sy aktiwiteite as eko-terroris voortgaan.

Alex skyn sy hoofligte op die man en haal sy geweer oor. Die verdagte gaan staan doodstil en hou sy hande bo sy kop. Alex hardloop na hom toe, gryp hom, hou sy regte aan hom voor, en gooi hom agter op sy bakkie. Hy het nie boei nie, maar hy is nie bekommerd dat die man sal vlug nie. Nie aangesien sy lewe op die spel is nie. Alex mors nie tyd nie. Hy skuif weer agter die stuurwiel in en jaag met die heuwel op om om te draai.

Toe besef hy wat besig is om met die vuurstorm te gebeur. Die wind het van rigting verander, en ’n golf vlamme wat al hoër strek, beweeg in hulle rigting. Alex draai die bakkie om die oomblik toe dit moontlik is. Die kaalkopman agter op die bakkie moes gesien het dat die vuur in hulle rigting brand, want hy skree: “Vinniger!”

Alex probeer om nie te kyk nie, hy probeer op die pad voor hom fokus, want hy moet onder kom, die laaste verdagte aan SWAT oorgee, en by die dierehospitaal uitkom. Hy moet na Bo toe gaan, vir Holly gaan dankie sê dat sy daar was vir Bo.

Maar tog kan hy nie help om te sien wat besig is om te gebeur nie.

Die vuur versprei teen ’n verbysterende spoed aan die agterkant van die canyon, vreet die bosse soos ’n wrede monster en veroorsaak ’n vuurpoel wat nou net agtien meter voor Alex se bakkie is. Dit beweeg af met die heuwel en lek aan die vuurpad voor hom. Hy sal moet vinnig maak as hy dit wil maak. As die vuur eers oor die pad is, sal dit ’n see van vlamme wees waardeur hy nie sal kan ry nie.

Hy trap die petrolpedaal dieper in, maar toe hy dit doen, gly sy agterste linkerviel amper van die nou paadjie af. Alex moet die petrol effens los om die bakkie weer tot op die grondpad te kry, en daardie paar sekondes is al wat dit neem. Voor hom woed die vuur oor die pad en aan die ander kant met die

heuvel op. Voordat Alex aan 'n plan kan dink of sy bakkie in trurat kan sit, spring die vuur 'n paar meter agter hom oor die pad.

“Ons is omring!” skree die verdagte.

Alex haal vinnig asem, kyk eers oor sy regterskouer, dan oor sy linkerskouer. Daar moet êrens 'n uitgang wees. Hy kan van die vuurpad afry as hy moet – dan het hulle ten minste 'n kans. Maar die vuurpoel woed rondom hulle, en Alex wonder vir 'n oomblik of dit is hoe die hel voel, vasgevang deur 'n muur van vuur met geen uitkomkans nie. Hulle gaan doodgaan, so miskien gaan hy nou uitvind. Dan kom dit by hom op dat Clay reg was oor die teksvers. Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen, en hy het presies dít gedoen. Maar op die ou einde gaan dit regtig na die dood lei.

Hy trap rem en stel hom voor hoe dit sal wees om deur die vlamme te hardloop of miskien onderdeur dit te kruip. Maar daar is geen opening in die vuur om hom nie. Hy klou vas aan die stuurwiel, sy hart klop wild, hy haal vinnig asem en is paniekbefange toe hy na die radio gryp. “Brady hier. Ek is vasgevang op die vuurpad. Word omring deur vlamme. Ek het hulp nodig, ouens. Stuur 'n helikopter, en maak gou.”

Die vlamme kom nader en vorm 'n sirkel wat hulle vasvang. Die vlamme is sowat dertig meter van hulle af, en met elke sekonde, met elke windvlaag, word die afstand minder. Dit is regtig die einde. Daar is nog een ding wat hy kan doen; daarom maak Alex die deur oop en skree vir die verdagte. “Klim in die bakkie. Maak gou!”

Die lang, maer verdagte spring agter van die bakkie af en klim by die agterste sitplek in, terwyl hy klein brandende kooltjies uit sy hare vryf. Weg is sy windmakerige houding, die magtige misdadiger wat Alex se hond geskiet het. Hy bewes so bang is hy. “Luister ... jy moet ons hier uitkry!”

“Ons is vasgevang.” Alex draai nie om om na hom te kyk nie, probeer nie eers harder praat nie. Hy maak sy deur toe en staar na die vlamme.

Op die agterste sitplek gaan die verdagte mal, skree vir hom om iets te doen, om deur die vlamme te ry, of hom vry te laat. Hy skree dat hulle moet bid, en hoe hy met die heuvel gaan afhardloop as Alex niks doen nie.

“Hardloop ... jy gaan nie ver kom nie.” Alex rus met sy voorkop op die stuurwiel en ignoreer die man. Hulle gaan albei sterf, en dit beteken hy gaan nooit weet of Bo leef nie, nooit weer vir Holly Brooks sien nie. Nooit die kans hê om vir haar dankie te sê en vir haar te sê wat hy nou vir seker weet nie.

Dat sy liefde vir haar nooit doodgegaan het nie, maak nie saak hoe hy probeer het om dit te versmoor nie.

Hy maak sy oë oop en voel die krag van die geveg wat hy so goed ken. Miskien kán hy deur die vlamme ry en dit lewend tot aan die ander kant maak. Hy het dit al vanaand gedoen, so hoekom nie ten minste probeer nie? Maar die vuur voor hom is hierdie keer nie 'n dun muur nie; dit is 'n see van vlamme, 'n vuurpoel. Hulle sal 'n paar meter in die vuur wees dan sal sy bakkie ontplof, en dit sal die einde wees.

Hy moes nooit weer met die heuvel opgekom het om die verdagte te kry nie.

As die man doodgebrand het in die vuur, sou dit sy eie skuld gewees het. Alex was nie verantwoordelik daarvoor nie, en op die ou einde sou die man gevang geword het – deur die vuur of die SWAT-span as hy afgekom het – net soos Joe gesê het. Joe het hom gewaarsku om nie weer op te kom nie. Alex gaan dus sterf as gevolg van sy eie hardkoppigheid, sy vasberadenheid om dinge op sy manier te doen. Dit is wat hom op die ou einde sal doodmaak – net soos die teksvers sê. Alex kyk weer oor sy skouer en sien wat hy reeds weet. Die vlamme is nou nader, die sirkel besig om kleiner te word.

Maar om hier te sit en wag om dood te gaan, druis in teen alles waarin Alex glo. Skielik onthou hy wat die verdagte 'n paar oomblikke gelede gesê het. Dat hulle moet bid ... Of die man dit nou bedoel het of nie, dit maak nie saak nie. As Alex binne die volgende paar sekondes gaan sterf, het hy geen ander keuse as om met God te praat nie – die God op wie hy sewe jaar gelede sy rug gedraai het.

Alex is nie seker of dit die vuur is wat naderkom of die een of ander geestelike handeling van die Heilige Gees nie, maar op hierdie oomblik weet hy vir seker dat sy pa nie dood is as gevolg van God se ongevoeligheid nie. Hy het gesterf omdat dit sy tyd was, en binne 'n oogwink het hy van die gruwelikheid van 11 September na die gange van die hemel gegaan. Sy pa sou God nooit blameer het nie, en nou kan Alex Hom ook nie blameer nie. Nie vir 'n minuut langer nie.

Hy maak die bakkie se deur oop en adrenalien vloei deur sy are. Dis vir hom byna onmoontlik om asem te haal of te dink of enigiets anders te voel as oorweldigende paniek. Die wind en brandende kooltjies waai bo hom, steek die veld aan die brand in die krimpende sirkel wat sy bakkie omring. Die misdadiger sit steeds agterin en skree op hom, smeeke hom om iets te doen, maar daar is niks wat hy kan doen nie.

Dit tref hom dat dit seker vir sy pa byna dieselfde moes gevoel het net voor hy dood is; vasgevang deur 'n muur van vlamme en nêrens om heen te gaan nie, met die wete dat die vuur deur terroriste veroorsaak is. Die verskil is dat sy pa oorlede is met God aan sy sy. Daarvan is Alex seker.

So hoekom kan hy selfs nie eers hier, minute voor sy dood, tot God roep nie? Sy pa wou meer as enigiets anders gehad het dat Alex 'n man van God moet wees, maar al die jare het hy geweier om daaraan te dink. Alex bal sy vuiste en probeer fokus bo die geraas van die vuurpoel om hom. Hy kan byna hoor hoe sy pa na hom roep, vir hom sê om uit te reik na God, voordat dit te laat is. Alex hurk onder die warrelende rookwolk en vir 'n paar sekondes, soos die verdagte, dink hy daaraan om te hardloop. Maar hy kan nêrens heen gaan nie. Dan, sonder om weer daaroor te dink, val hy op sy knieë neer. Die klein klippies en gruis maak sy knieë seer deur sy broek, maar hy gee nie om nie.

“Here!” Die uitroep klink desperaat toe dit bo die geraas van die vuurstorm uitklink. “Ek is jammer!” Hy skree die woorde uit, maar die vuur en wind raas so dat hy dit skaars kan hoor. Hy het God geblameer en in die proses het hy die lewe verloor wat sy pa vir hom wou gehad het. Hy het almal wat vir hom

lief was, weggestoot, en hy het God probeer wees, die soort Almagtige wat hy gedink het God behoort te wees. Maar nou raak dit alles vir hom duidelik, die feit dat Clay reg was. Met Christus se krag is die enigste boosheid wat ooit oorwin kan word die boosheid in hom.

Hy lig sy hande en gesig na die gloeiende lug bo hom. "Help my, Here! Ek is nie gereed om te sterf nie! Asseblief ... vergewe my."

Iets ontplof in sy hart en siel, en soos iets van lank gelede herken hy die gevoelens, want dit is wat hom voor 11 September gevorm het. Gevoelens van liefde en hoop en verlange, 'n begeerte na die soort lewe wat sy ouers gedeel het. 'n Gunsteling teksvers van lank gelede spoel oor hom: "Ek is tot alles in staat deur Hom wat my krag gee." Hy het dit eenkeer met Holly gedeel toe alles voor die wind gegaan het en dit die hele jaar lank somer was. En skielik, te midde van die grootste gevaar waarin hy nog ooit was, vul dit hom weer. *Dankie, Here, ek voel U hier in my.*

Hy kan dit doen, want met elke asemteug gee God vir hom krag wat hy die afgelope sewe jaar nie geken het nie. Alex onthou iets wat sy pa vir hom vertel het. Dat daar 'n fees in die hemel is elke keer wanneer een sondaar hom tot God draai. Alex glimlag ten spyte van sy omstandighede. *Laat my pa deel wees van die feesvierings, Here ... Ek sien dit so duidelik. Dankie ...*

Hy kan amper die orkes hoor.

Maar selfs terwyl hy bid, beweeg die vuur nader. Dit trek al die lug uit die klein spasietjie om hom en hy sukkel om asem te haal. Alex is nie bang nie, hy ervaar nie meer paniek nie. Hy wil nie sterf nie, maar daar is geen manier uit nie. Die einde kan enige oomblik aanbreek. Die volgende vlaag wind en die woedende vuurpoel sal hulle verswelg. Alex bly op sy knieë en dink weer aan Bo en Holly en sy ma. Ten minste het hy die kans gehad om vir sy ma te sê hy is jammer. Die vlamme se hitte versmoor hom nou, en Alex het 'n laaste gedagte: Ten minste sal daar iets goeds uit sy dood spruit. Want binne 'n paar minute sal hy weer sy pa sien.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Jamie was listening to radio updates of the fire as Eric drove her to the hospital. It was still dark outside, and the smoke was thick across the freeway, the orange glow eerie in the western sky, especially since the sun was still hours from rising. Jamie replayed the events of the last half hour. She'd been awake, sitting up in bed when Joe made the initial update. He told her what had happened and how violent the guys from the REA had been. And he told her about Clay.

"You need to get to the hospital, Jamie. As soon as you can."

Jamie's first call was to Eric and Laura, and they had come immediately. Laura was at her house now with the still-sleeping CJ and Sierra, and Eric drove her to the hospital. After Joe's call, Jamie had heard from the doctor. Clay was in critical condition, and she should hurry. But with all the terrible news, Jamie clung to one single hope, something else the doctor had told her.

They expected Clay to pull through.

That alone kept her sane as they sped along the Ventura Freeway to the Los Robles Medical Center; it was the only reason she could listen to the radio for updates. The fire was raging out of control, ripping through the hillsides at incredible speeds and spreading in all directions. The most recent news stated that an entire neighborhood at the base of the mountain had been evacuated. In addition, firefighters were evacuating other neighborhoods — well in advance of the blaze reaching them.

The news reporter kept stating what anyone listening already knew. That the fire was set by members of the REA, and that one of them had been shot and killed by a K9 deputy. The reports didn't say the name of the officer, but Jamie already knew it was Alex. What other K9 officer would've been at the scene of the fire, working to apprehend the suspects?

The number of homes that could burn in the process might reach into the thousands, according to officials. Already — because of the shifting winds and the amount of dry brush in the Las Virgenes hills, the fire had the potential to be one of the area's worst ever — and one of the most violent.

The suspects had shot the security guard, then Clay, and finally Bo. Joe had told Jamie all the details he knew. The security guard was in surgery, but he was going to be okay. No one was sure about Bo.

“This just in regarding the deadly fire burning out of control in the Las Virgenes Canyon area,” the announcer interrupted Jamie’s thoughts. “A spokesperson for the sheriff’s department says that at this very moment they have a K9 officer and a suspect trapped on a fire road somewhere on the mountain.” Her voice took on a grave tone. “Officials are doing everything they can to make a rescue, but the flames are too intense and the terrain too rugged for emergency vehicles. We’ll keep you posted as we receive developments on this tragic story.”

“Dear God ... no, please.” Jamie whispered the desperate words. “Eric, we need to pray.”

Eric kept his eyes on the road, but he reached out and took her hand. “God ... we need a miracle. We think Alex is trapped, but you know right where he is.” Eric’s voice was tense, and his mouth sounded dry. “Be with him, please ... clear the fire in a way that only you can do.”

After the prayer, Jamie wanted to call someone — Joe or another of the SWAT guys, because like before she knew that the officer trapped on the hillside had to be Alex. He must’ve gone back into the flames after the suspect, and now ... *God, he has so much to live for ... give him a miracle. Put up a hedge of protection around him and stop the flames from reaching him. Get him out, God ... please.*

She pictured Alex trapped in the middle of a firestorm, and the image made her sick to her stomach. She couldn’t think about it, not now when she was so worried about Clay. Alex would be okay ... he had to be okay. She’d be at the hospital soon, a few minutes at the most. She was anxious to be with Clay, to touch him and see for herself that he was going to be okay.

Outside her car, the wind felt worse than before, and all along the freeway they were passed by fire trucks and emergency vehicles. A shudder ran through her arms. This moment felt eerily like seven years ago when she raced to a New York hospital in search of Jake. Only that time, the person fighting for life in the hospital bed hadn’t been Jake — but Eric Michaels. This was different, everything about it. They’d already been through so much. She couldn’t imagine losing Clay now, not Clay or Alex. Eric turned into the hospital parking lot, and she had to blink so she could see the building clearly, that it was Los Robles Medical Center and not the hospital in New York City. *It’s not the same ... this is a different day, God, help me hold onto the truth. This isn’t 9/11.*

Daughter, breathe ... my peace I give to you ... I don't give as the world gives

...

Eric parked the car, jumped out, and hurried to her side. He helped her to her feet and led her across the parking lot. The whole time she kept thinking about the gentle response to her prayer, the words about peace. God's peace. That was exactly what she needed right now. Whatever happened today, no one could take that away from her. As she walked, she willed herself to believe that very soon God would grant a miracle for her and for Clay.

And especially for Alex.



The flames were right on top of them now, and Alex wondered if they might die from the heat before the fire reached them. He'd radioed down to the command station, but it hadn't done any good. The inferno was too deep and wide, too all-consuming for any of the firefighters to reach him. His only hope was a helicopter, and so far he hadn't seen a single drop of fire retardant. That wasn't surprising, really. The helicopters were already in use, so after his first call it could've taken fifteen minutes or more to get a drop overhead.

He was still on his knees, his face still raised to the burning sky. He'd lost out on seven years of talking to God, doing the thing his father had taught him to do. Seven years of being angry at the God who had created him and given him his family — even if that wonderful life hadn't lasted as long as Alex wanted. This was only the bus stop, right? Wasn't that what his father used to say? The great and joyous life everlasting was on the other side. His father had taught him that, and now it was what Alex once more believed. What he had always believed, even while he let his pain and sorrow cloud out the truth. Seven years were gone, but every second he had left in this life, he would spend talking to God.

Thank You, Lord ... because I feel You here in this inferno. I feel Your peace and Your forgiveness, Your salvation and certainty. I never should've blamed You, God ... He opened his eyes, and the fire was almost close enough to touch. The suspect in the back was quiet now, uttering only an occasional whimper, too terrified to speak.

Alex could die and be with his dad and his Heavenly Father, now that he had made his peace with God. He would finish well, far better than he would've if this had been a sudden accident or a bullet to his head, the bullet Bo took. But he had one regret, one area where he had failed. And once he was dead he would never have the chance to make it up again.

His regret was Holly.

As her sweet face filled his heart and soul, he used his final breaths to ask God one more time: “Please, Lord ...” he yelled into the roaring fire, “Please save us! Let me have another chance. I have so much time to make up for, God ... please!”

The noise around him grew louder, as if a speeding freight train was bearing down on them, about to crush them. *My son ... I have loved you with an everlasting love ... I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you.* The words were in the wind, in the fire, as clearly as if God had stepped down into this terrible moment and spoken them directly to Alex.

He gripped the edge of his truck and lifted himself off his knees so he could see better. A rushing sound added to the noise, and a strange sensation came over Alex, like the atmosphere itself was changing. Something was happening, something with the wind. Around the truck the burning embers swirled and danced and gusted in every direction, and then suddenly, strangely, the fire blew hard to the west and lifted. Alex brought his fist to his mouth. *God, it can't be ... it isn't possible ...*

Ahead of them, the fire road was suddenly and instantly clear again, the blaze raising several stories high on the right side, but reduced to almost nothing on the left. Hope shot straight through him, and Alex didn't hesitate. This was a miracle, nothing less. God had created a path, and this time he was going to take it. He hurled himself behind the wheel and started the engine.

“Go ... drive!” The guy in the backseat must've seen the hole in the flames.

Alex didn't respond. The miracle in front of them was a gift from God, and if the Lord had opened the hole, He would keep it open long enough for them to get down the mountain. Alex drove with a single-mindedness and purpose that he hadn't known since before September 11. God had set him free. Not just from the fire, but from himself — and both kinds of freedom could only have come from the Lord.

It took several minutes to get to the bottom of the hill, and as he did he grabbed his radio again. “We made it through. Have SWAT waiting.”

For the first time since the fire lifted, the arsonist fell silent, probably with the realization that for him, things had only just started heating up. The charges that would be filed against him would put him away forever, Alex was pretty sure. He reached the bottom just as Joe stepped out of his squad car.

Alex got the suspect out of his truck as fast as he could and handed him over to Joe. “I already read him his rights, and I'll write my report after I check on

Bo.” He didn’t want to spend another minute being angry or full of rage. The system would take care of Owl and his buddy. Alex had more important matters at hand, desperate life or death matters. He waited until Joe had the suspect cuffed in the backseat of his car, then Alex took hold of his friend’s arm. “How’s Clay?”

“He’s in surgery, but it looks good.” Joe hesitated, squinting against the blowing wind and smoke. “What happened up there, Brady? You look different.”

Alex laughed just once, the sort of laugh that told his friend there wasn’t enough time to explain it all right now. “I’m still trying to believe it.” He kept his eyes on Joe but started walking back to his truck. “I shouldn’t be here; let’s just say that.” He climbed into his truck and shut the door. Through the open window he yelled once more to Joe as he peeled off toward the main road. “I’ve gotta go see my dog.”

As he drove, he kept both his windows down. The night wind was smoky and warm, but it was fresher than anything he’d been breathing up on the mountain. He let the wind dust off the grit and ashes that covered his face and tried to get his mind around what had just happened. He should be dead, in heaven with his father. But God had heard his cry and granted him the precious gift he’d begged for.

More time.

It was just after four in the morning, still dark outside. He would get to the vet hospital and see how Bo was doing, and sometime before sunup he would tell Holly everything he should’ve told her years ago. She had probably moved on by now, and there was nothing he could do about that. But she needed to know what had happened on the hill, how he’d come face-to-face with the same kind of terrorist-set inferno that had killed his father, and in that horrifying moment the impossible had happened.

He’d found his faith in God again.

A wholeness filled his soul, and Alex felt the same freedom he’d experienced in the midst of the fire. He didn’t need to be so driven any longer. He could capture the bad guys, because that was his job, and it was one he would always enjoy. But he couldn’t capture the evil around him. It was a pervasive part of life, and would be that way until Jesus returned. The only evil he could address — like Clay had told him — was the evil within himself.

Something he planned to spend the next few hours working on.

Hoofstuk 28

Jamie luister na die nuutste inligting oor die brande oor die radio terwyl Eric haar hospitaal toe vat. Dit is steeds donker buite, en die rook lê dik oor die deurpad, die oranje gloed in die lug wes van hulle lyk onheilspellend, veral aangesien die son eers oor 'n paar uur gaan opkom. Jamie dink weer na oor die gebeure die afgelope halfuur. Sy was wakker, het in die bed gesit toe Joe haar die nuus laat weet. Hy het vir haar vertel wat gebeur het en hoe gewelddadig die ouens van die ROA was. En hy het vir haar van Clay vertel.

“Jy moet by die hospitaal uitkom, Jamie. So vinnig as wat jy kan.”

Jamie het heel eerste vir Eric en Laura gebel, en hulle het onmiddellik gekom. Laura is nou by die huis saam met CJ en Sierra wat steeds slaap, en Eric vat haar hospitaal toe. Ná Joe se oproep het die dokter haar gebel. Clay se toestand is kritiek, en sy moet vinnig maak. Maar met al die verskriklike nuus, hou Jamie vas aan een ding wat die dokter vir haar gesê het.

Hulle verwag dat Clay dit gaan oorleef.

Dit alleen help haar om nie mal te word nie terwyl hulle met Ventura-deurpad afjaag na die Los Robles Medical Center; dit is al rede hoekom sy steeds na die radio luister vir inligting. Die vuur woed steeds voort en is nou buite beheer, skeur teen 'n ongelooflike spoed deur die heuwelagtige gebied en versprei in alle rigtings. Die laaste radioberig het gesê dat 'n hele woonbuurt teen die voet van die heuwel ontruim is. Daarmee saam ontruim brandweermanne ook ander woonbuurte – voordat die vuur hulle ook bereik.

Die verslaggewer hou aan sê wat almal wat luister reeds weet. Dat die brand gestig is deur lede van die ROA, en dat een van hulle geskiet is deur 'n polisieman van die honde-eenheid en dat hy dood is. Die berigte het nie die polisieman se naam genoem nie, maar Jamie weet reeds dit is Alex. Watter ander polisieman van die honde-eenheid sal by die toneel van die brand wees en die verdagtes probeer vang?

Volgens die polisie kan die hoeveelheid huise wat in die proses gaan afbrand moontlik meer as duisend wees. As gevolg van die wind wat kort-kort van rigting verander en die droë veld in die Las Virgenes-heuwels, het die brand reeds die potensiaal om een van die gebied se ergste sowel as gewelddadigste brande nog te wees. Die verdagtes het die sekuriteitswag geskiet, toe vir Clay en daarna vir Bo. Joe het vir Jamie alles vertel wat hy geweet het. Die sekuriteitswag word geopereer, maar hy gaan dit oorleef. Niemand weet iets van Bo nie.

“Hier volg die nuutste inligting oor die dodelike vuur wat buite beheer is in die Las Virgenes Canyon-gebied,” onderbreek die verslaggewer Jamie se gedagtes. “'n Polisiewoordvoerder sê dat 'n polisieman van die honde-eenheid en 'n verdagte op die oomblik vasgevang is op die vuurpad op die heuwel.” Haar stem word donker en diep. “Die polisie doen alles in hulle vermoë om hulle te red, maar die vlamme is te kwaai en die terrein te rof vir noodvoertuie. Ons sal u laat weet sodra ons nog inligting omtrent hierdie tragiese storie ontvang.”

“Liewe Here ... nee, asseblief.” Jamie fluister die woorde desperaat. “Eric, ons moet bid.”

Eric hou sy oë op die pad, maar hy reik uit en vat haar hand. “Here ... ons het ’n wonderwerk nodig. Ons dink Alex is vasgevang, maar U weet presies waar hy is.” Eric se stem is intens, en sy mond klink droog. “Wees asseblief by hom ... Laat die vuur ophou brand op ’n manier wat net U dit kan doen.”

Ná die gebed wil Jamie iemand bel – vir Joe of enige ander SWAT-lid, want soos voorheen weet sy dat die polisieman wat op die heuwel vasgekeer is, Alex moet wees. Hy moes teruggegaan het, die vlamme in, om die verdagte te kry, en nou ... *Here, hy het soveel om voor te leef ... laat vir hom asseblief ’n wonderwerk gebeur. Omring hom en keer die vlamme om nie naby aan hom te kom nie. Kry hom daaruit, Here ... asseblief.*

Sy stel haarself voor hoe Alex in die middel van ’n vuurstorm vasgekeer is, en die beeld maak haar na. Sy kan nie daaraan dink nie, nie noudat sy so bekommerd is oor Clay nie. Alex gaan oukei wees ... hy móét net wees. Sy is amper by die hospitaal, nog net ’n paar minute. Sy kan nie wag om by Clay te wees nie, om aan hom te raak en met haar eie oë te sien dat hy gaan leef.

Buite haar motor waai die wind erger as voorheen, en al langs die deurpad ry hulle verby brandweerwaens en noodvoertuie. Hoendervleis slaan op haar arms uit. Hierdie oomblik voel so onheilspellend soos sewe jaar gelede toe sy na ’n hospitaal in New York gejaag het op soek na Jake. Daardie keer was die persoon wat in die hospitaalbed om sy lewe geveg het nie Jake nie, maar Eric Michaels. Maar alles is hierdie keer anders. Hulle is al deur so baie. Sy kan haarself nie voorstel om Clay nou te verloor nie; nie vir Clay of Alex nie. Eric draai by die hospitaal se parkeerarea in, en sy moet haar oë knip om die gebou duidelik te kan sien, dat dit Los Robles Medical Center is en nie die hospitaal in New York nie. *Dit is nie dieselfde nie ... vandag is anders, Here, help my om vas te hou aan die waarheid. Dit is nie 11 September nie.*

My dogter, haal diep asem ... Ek gee vir jou my vrede ... nie dié van die wêreld nie.

Eric parkeer die motor, spring uit en hardloop na haar kant toe. Hy help haar uit die motor en lei haar oor die parkeerarea. Die hele tyd dink sy aan die sagte reaksie op haar gebed, die woorde oor vrede. God se vrede. Dit is presies wat sy nou nodig het. Wat ook al vandag gebeur, niemand kan dit van haar af wegneem nie. Terwyl sy loop, dwing sy haarself om te glo dat God binnekort vir haar en Clay met ’n wonderwerk sal seën.

En veral ook vir Alex.



Die vlamme is nou op hulle en Alex wonder of hulle dalk gaan doodgaan van die hitte voor die vuur hulle bereik. Hy het met die polisiestasie oor die radio gepraat, maar dit het nie regtig gehelp nie. Die vuurpoel is te diep en te wyd, te verterend vir enige van die brandweermanne om by hom uit te kom. Sy enigste hoop is ’n helikopter, en sover het hy nog nie ’n enkele druppel water gesien nie. Dit is nie eintlik vreemd nie. Die helikopters word reeds gebruik;

daarom kan dit ná sy oproep meer as vyftien minute wees voordat hulle na hom toe kan kom.

Hy is steeds op sy knieë, sy gesig na die brandende lug gelig. Hy het sewe jaar se gesprekke met God misgeloop, om dít te doen wat sy pa hom geleer doen het. Sewe jaar waarin hy kwaad was vir God wat hom geskep het en vir hom 'n gesin gegee het – selfs al het daardie wonderlike lewe nie so lank geduur as wat Alex gehoop het nie. Dit is net die busstop, nie waar nie? Is dit nie wat sy pa altyd gesê het nie? Die groot en vreugdevolle ewige lewe wag aan die ander kant. Sy pa het hom dit geleer, en nou glo Alex dit weer. Dis wat hy altyd geglo het, selfs toe hy toegelaat het dat sy pyn en hartseer die waarheid verdoesel. Sewe jaar is verby, maar elke sekonde van sy lewe wat oor is, sal hy met die Here praat.

Dankie, Here ... want ek voel u teenwoordigheid hier in die vuurpoel. Ek voel u vrede en vergifnis, u redding en sekerheid. Ek moes U nooit blameer het nie, Here ... Hy maak sy oë oop en die vuur is so naby dat hy byna daaraan kan raak. Die verdagte agterin sy bakkie is nou stil, gee so nou en dan 'n kreungeluid, te verskrik om te praat.

Alex kan nou maar sterf en saam met sy pa en hemelse Vader wees, noudat hy vrede gemaak het met God. Sy lewe sal goed eindig, baie beter as wat dit sou as hy skielik in 'n ongeluk moes wees of geskiet geword het, in plaas van Bo. Maar hy is oor een ding spyt, een gebied waarin hy misluk het. En wanneer hy dood is, sal hy nooit die geleentheid hê om dit reg te maak nie.

Hy is spyt oor Holly.

Toe haar mooi gesig sy hart en siel vul, gebruik hy sy laaste asem om 'n laaste keer iets van God te vra: “Asseblief, Here ...” skree hy tot in die vuur wat om hom woed. “Red ons, asseblief! Gee my nog 'n kans. Ek het soveel verlore tyd om voor op te maak, Here ... asseblief!”

Die geraas om hom word harder, asof 'n trein op hulle afjaag, hulle gaan doodry. *My seun, Ek het jou oneindig baie lief ... Ek weet watter planne Ek vir jou het, planne van voorspoed en nie teëspoed nie.* Die woorde is in die wind, in die vuur, so duidelik asof God in hierdie afgryslike oomblik aarde toe gekom het en direk met Alex praat.

Hy gryp die kant van sy bakkie vas en staan van sy knieë af op sodat hy beter kan sien. 'n Geluid wat klink soos die wind wat jaag, dra by tot die geraas, en 'n vreemde sensasie kom oor Alex, asof die atmosfeer self besig is om te verander. Iets is besig om te gebeur, iets in die wind. Die brandende kooltjies dans en draai om die bakkie en waai in verskillende rigtings, en dan skielik, vreemd, waai die vuur weg in 'n westelike rigting en is dit weg. Alex bring sy vuus tot voor sy mond. *God, dit kan nie wees nie ... dit is onmoontlik ...*

Voor hulle is die vuurpad skielik skoon. Aan die regterkant brand die vuur hoog die lug in, maar aan die linkerkant is dit byna weg. Die hoop vlam op in Alex en hy aarsel nie. Dit kan net 'n wonderwerk wees, niks anders nie. God het 'n pad gemaak en hierdie keer gaan hy dit vat. Hy spring agter die stuurwiel in en skakel die enjin aan.

“Vinnig ... ry!” die man op die agterste sitplek moes die opening in die vlamme gesien het.

Alex reageer nie. Die wonderwerk voor hulle is ’n geskenk van God, en as die Here die opening geskep het, sal Hy dit lank genoeg oophou sodat hulle met die heuwel kan afkom. Alex ry deur die vlamme met ’n opregtheid en doelgerigtheid wat hy sedert 11 September nie geken het nie. God het hom bevry. Nie net van die vuur nie, maar van homself – en hierdie vryheid kan nét van die Here af kom.

Dit neem hulle ’n paar minute om tot onder te kom, en toe hulle deur die vuur is, gryp Alex weer die radio. “Ons is deur die vuur. Sorg dat die SWAT-offisiere gereed is.”

Vir die eerste keer vandat die vuur weggekwyn het, is die brandstigter stil. Hy besef waarskynlik dat hy nou in groter moeilikheid is. Die aanklagte wat teen hom ingebring sal word, sal hom lewenslank tronk toe stuur, daarvan is Alex seker. Hy bereik die voet van die heuwel net toe Joe uit sy polisiemotor klim.

Alex haal die verdagte so vinnig as wat hy kan uit sy bakkie en oorhandig hom aan Joe. “Ek het reeds sy regte aan hom voorgehou, en ek sal my verslag skryf nadat ek by Bo was.” Hy wil nie nog ’n enkele minuut deurbring deur kwaad te wees nie. Die sisteem sal vir Uil en sy vriend sorg. Alex het belangriker dinge wat vir hom wag, sake van lewe en dood. Hy wag totdat Joe die verdagte geboei en agter in sy motor ingedruk het. Toe raak hy aan sy vriend se arm. “Hoe gaan dit met Clay?”

“Hulle is besig om hom te opereer, maar dinge lyk goed.” Joe aarsel, trek sy oë op skrefies teen die wind en rook. “Wat het daarbo gebeur, Brady? Jy lyk anders.”

Alex lag die tipe lag wat vir sy vriend sê dat hy nie nou tyd het om alles te verduidelik nie. “Ek probeer steeds om dit te glo.” Hy hou sy oë op Joe, maar begin terugstap na sy bakkie toe. “Kom ek sê maar net ek moes nie hier gewees het nie.” Hy klim in sy bakkie en maak die deur toe. Deur die oop venster skree hy ’n laaste keer vir Joe terwyl hy in die rigting van die hoofpad ry: “Ek moet na Bo toe gaan.”

Terwyl hy ry, hou hy albei vensters oop. Die nagwind is rokerig en warm, maar dit is skoner as dié wat hy bo-op die berg ingeasem het. Hy laat die wind die roet en as op sy gesig afwaai en probeer dink aan wat nou net gebeur het. Hy moes dood gewees het, in die hemel saam met sy pa. Maar God het hom hoor roep en vir hom die kosbare geskenk gegee waarvoor hy gesmeek het.

Meer tyd.

Dit is net ná vier in die oggend, nog donker buite. Hy sal gou dierehospitaal toe ry om te sien hoe dit met Bo gaan, en een of ander tyd voor sonop sal hy vir Holly alles vertel wat hy haar jare gelede moes vertel het. Sy het waarskynlik teen hierdie tyd al aanbeweeg, en daar is niks wat hy daaromtrent kan doen nie. Maar sy moet weet wat op die heuwel gebeur het, en hoe hy van aangesig tot aangesig gekom het met dieselfde tipe vuurpoel wat sy pa se dood beteken het, ook deur terroriste veroorsaak, en dat die onmoontlike in

daardie gruwelike oomblik gebeur het.

Hy het weer sy geloof in God gevind.

Sy siel voel weer heel, en Alex voel dieselfde vryheid wat hy midde-in die vuur ervaar het. Hy hoef nie meer so gedrewe te wees nie. Hy kan die misdadigers vang, want dit is sy werk en iets wat hy altyd sal geniet. Maar hy kan nie van die boosheid om hom ontslae raak nie. Dit is deel van die lewe, en dit sal so wees totdat Jesus weer kom. Die enigste boosheid waaraan hy iets kan doen, soos Clay vir hom gesê het, is die boosheid in homself. En dit is iets waaraan hy van plan is om die volgende paar uur te werk.

TWENTY-NINE

Holly had been sitting in the waiting room a long time, too long. By now someone should've come out and told her that the dog was okay, that he was out of surgery and they'd stitched him up. The silence couldn't be a good sign. But since she had no one to talk to, and since she was worried sick that Alex was stuck in the fire at the top of the mountain, she used the time to pray.

Funny how she'd resisted a relationship with God for so many years, how she'd let her faith grow cold to the point that she no longer wanted to go to church and sometimes doubted God even existed, but here ... in the face of intense tragedy, surrounded by the greatest fear she'd known since 9/11, prayer came as easily as her next heartbeat.

She prayed for Bo and for Alex and for Alex's friend — the other sheriff's deputy. Once she'd done that, she felt fresh tears on her cheeks and she did what she should've done long ago. She asked God to forgive her for walking away, for letting her love for Him grow cold.

Of course I believe in You, God ... she uttered the words silently, and as she did they cast a flicker of light in the dark halls of her soul, where the sun hadn't shone for far too long. *I'm sorry, God ... I need You here with me. Please, God ... let me know You're here.*

As she finished that part of her prayer, a janitor entered the otherwise empty waiting room. Holly felt awkward, sitting by herself and crying. She pulled a tissue from her purse and dabbed it beneath her eyes. There was something peculiar about the janitor, something in his stature or mannerisms. Holly watched him, trying to figure it out. The man was small and hunched, with white thinning hair that poked out from beneath a Yankees baseball cap. A name tag on his flannel shirt read only "Max."

Holly was drawn to the man, but she had no idea why. He didn't seem to notice her as he set to work, lifting the mop into a bucket of water, wringing out the excess, and then flinging it onto the floor. She watched him intently, trying to figure out why he looked so familiar, why his actions seemed so

peculiar. He was five minutes into the job when he suddenly stopped and looked straight at her. “You ... you’re a believer?”

Holly was startled by his question. She was tempted to look over her shoulder, in case he was talking to someone else, but she recovered long enough to point subtly at herself. “Me?”

“Yes.” The man smiled, and again there was something different about him, almost otherworldly. “Are you a believer?”

“I am.” This time Holly didn’t hesitate. “I was just praying.” Emotion spilled into her voice. “It’s been a long night.”

“You were involved in the fire.” It wasn’t a question. He rested on the handle of his mop, his eyes looking almost through her.

“Yes. I was.” Holly wondered how the man could’ve known that detail. Did she smell that strongly of smoke? Or was her face smudged with ashes? She searched the man’s face, trying to figure him out. Maybe she’d seen him before, at the townhouses where she lived or at the market.

He smiled at her, his eyes boring into hers. “The Lord wants you to know something ... He’s never going to leave you or forsake you. No matter what happens, no matter how long.”

Holly sucked in a quick breath, and it stuck in her throat. A dozen questions came at her, but before she could voice a single one, the janitor tipped the rim of his baseball cap and shuffled off down the hallway.

As soon as he was gone, she realized something had changed — she wasn’t afraid anymore. Sad for the injured dog, deeply concerned about Alex, but she could feel the presence of God with her, and she remembered something her mom had told her not long ago. You don’t have to feel God to know He’s with you. The Bible tells us God is with us, and that’s all the proof we need to know. It’s a fact. Feelings or no feelings.

For years God had been with her, but Holly hadn’t wanted to feel His presence, hadn’t sought Him out or thought to talk to Him for any length of time. Even so, God had been with her — the same way He so clearly was with her now. She had asked God to let her know He was here, and he’d sent Max, the janitor.

She glanced at the check-in desk, at the two women and one man in white coats working on various computers. The doctor and his assistant hadn’t been seen since Bo was wheeled in, and again that told Holly the situation couldn’t be good. There had to be some kind of news on Alex’s dog, but still no one had come out to talk to her. She prayed some more, but then her prayers did

something she hadn't expected them to do. They took her back to the time before 9/11, when she and Alex were sure about life and love and even forever.

A door sounded at the other end of the waiting room, and Holly looked up to see the doctor enter. He was moving slowly, his face grim, and he stopped a few feet from her. "Ms. Brooks?"

She was on her feet, her heart pounding. Like everyone involved in the fire, she was exhausted and drained. As she watched the doctor she felt faint, and she steadied the back of her legs against the sofa where she'd been sitting. She looked into the doctor's eyes and she knew, she knew before he said a word.

"About Bo ... the news isn't good."

Holly wanted to stop him there, because if something happened to Alex's dog, then maybe Alex would never recover. She remembered the newspaper article, the stoic, cold look on Alex's face and the dog at his side. Holly had no idea how long they'd worked together, but Alex's love for Bo had been obvious tonight. She wanted to run, leave the waiting room and let the news fall on someone else's ears. Because hours ago she'd allowed herself the faintest hope that in finding each other again, Alex might also find himself. That together they would both find the God who would never leave them nor forsake them. But that hope would be gone forever if something happened to Alex's dog.

No matter what Max the janitor had said.



Bo was going to be okay. By the time Alex wheeled his Dodge into the parking lot of the veterinarian hospital, he had convinced himself. Dogs bled out much faster than people, so if the bullet had gotten him in one of his major organs or an artery, he would've died long before they reached the ambulance. As he drove, Alex thought about calling for an update, but he didn't have Holly's number, and there was no time to grab his phone and call information.

Better just to drive and get there.

Alex parked and ran from his car up a few steps to the front door. The place wasn't very big, and the waiting room was empty except for Holly and ...

He stopped and stared at the scene taking place before his eyes. Holly was crying, her fingers covering her face, and the doctor had his hand on her shoulder. *No, God ...* he took a step back, because this couldn't be happening.

This wasn't the end. He could run back out to his truck, drive home, and there would be Bo, sleeping near the front door waiting for his return. The whole thing was a mistake, right? It had to be.

Holly must've heard him, because she turned and looked at him, her eyes red and swollen, her face twisted in sorrow.

"No ..." he shoved his hands into the back pockets of his jeans and shook his head as he looked from her to the doctor. "Not Bo ... don't tell me." He briefly noticed the workers behind the front desk discreetly leave for some back part of the building. They were giving him privacy so that ... so that ...

"Alex." Holly's arms were crossed and she was gripping her elbows, her whole body shaking.

"Mr. Brady," the doctor was walking toward him.

Alex shook his head again and turned toward the door. He wasn't here, not in a vet hospital with Bo on the other side of the waiting room. He squeezed his eyes closed and grabbed a fistful of his own hair. He wasn't here. He was at headquarters, and his sergeant was ushering him into a small room where a striking young German shepherd was standing at attention, his ears forward, and the sergeant was saying, "Alex, I'd like you to meet your new partner." He blinked and shook his head, refusing to hear anything from anyone, and there he and Bo were at the far end of a grassy field at the training center, seven hundred and ten hours into training. A dozen officers were giving hand signs to their respective K9 partners, and every dog was messing up. Every dog but Bo. Then he was at home a few months later, looking for the TV remote so he could watch the Dodgers game before he went to bed, and there was Bo trotting into the room from the back of the condo, the remote in his mouth, and he was cocking his head, looking at Alex as if to say, "I'm here for you, friend. Anything you need, I'm here."

"Mr. Brady?"

Alex dropped his hands to his side and shook his head one last time. He could feel Bo beside him still, his dog's coat brushing against his legs as they jogged the hills at Pierce College a few weeks ago. He wasn't sure how, but he found the strength to turn around. "I'm sorry ..." he looked into the doctor's eyes. "Tell me."

The doctor frowned and his eyes shifted to the floor. When he looked up, there was no question what he was going to say. "We tried everything we could. The bullet pierced one of Bo's lungs and perforated his liver. By the time he got here, he'd lost a lot of blood, but even if we'd operated on him at the scene he wouldn't have made it. Just too much damage. We've been in

surgery since he got here, but — “The doctor pressed his lips together, as if he understood that no explanation was needed. No words would help now. He put his hand on Alex’s shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

Holly was still standing where she had been when Alex walked into the hospital, tears streaming down her cheeks, and quiet sobs shaking her shoulders. She dropped back down to the sofa and put her face in her hands. Alex couldn’t think about her, about the conversation he needed to have with her. Right now he had to take care of the matter at hand.

Bo was dead. “Can I ...,” he swallowed, struggling. “Can I see him?”

“Yes.” The doctor moved somberly, the way people moved around in a funeral home, and again the moment didn’t feel like it matched the reality. Bo wasn’t dead ... not his Bo. He was riding in the backseat, barking at the fire and ready for action, and he was heeling at his side, his partner. His friend.

“This way.” The doctor walked through a set of double doors to a room at the end of a short hallway. He opened the door and allowed Alex to step inside by himself. “Take as long as you need.”

Alex nodded, but already his eyes were on Bo, lying on the table. He heard the door shut behind him, and Alex stayed in that spot, not moving. Because from here, Bo was only sleeping, the familiar blacks and browns and tans that made up his back spread out just the way they’d been a few hours ago at the foot of his bed when Alex first heard the call.

He was probably cold and lonely up there on the sterile examination table. Alex went to him and put his hand on Bo’s side. A gathered sheet was pressed against his chest, covering the area where he’d been shot, but otherwise he looked fine and whole, his expression the familiar one of loyalty and trust.

Alex put his hand on the dog’s side and patted him, slowly and steadily. He was still warm, still full of the life that had driven him to do whatever Alex asked of him. “Bo ... you’re a good dog, boy. Good dog.” He moved his hand up to Bo’s head and ran his fingers through the softer hair beneath the dog’s ear. “Good boy.”

A flood of sorrow was rising in his heart, and Alex didn’t try to stop it. Alex had been driven to get the REA guys at any cost, and Bo had paid the price. More than that, he had done it willingly, rushing at the suspect with the gun even before Alex had seen him. Bo’s heart had beat with one singular concern — the safety and well-being of his partner.

Alex’s tears came then, and he was hit by the certain reality that he had failed. He hadn’t stopped evil — not in the city of Los Angeles, and not at the Oak

Canyon Estates, and not in his own life. Evil had found him, anyway, and now his dog was dead. He wanted to yell, rail at the collective bad in the world that would allow a dog as good and true as Bo to take a bullet. But he couldn't yell here, because the sound would frighten Bo. The dog hated when Alex was angry for any reason, and there was no need to upset him now.

He patted Bo's head again, and once more a host of yesterdays came over him. He was at the beach watching the surf, trying to find himself and failing, but grateful because Bo was his friend anyway, Bo right beside him, his ears back, eyes alert to any danger that might come Alex's way. Bo was there in the middle of every good memory he'd had over the last three years, Bo dashing out along a suspect trail and knocking to the ground one bad guy after another. Bo riding in the backseat behind him for what felt like a lifetime of calls and adventures.

He should've left him home tonight. "Bo," he held the dog's head, cradled it against his chest. "I'm sorry, boy ... I'm so sorry."

This wasn't how it was supposed to end. He and Bo had years of calls ahead of them, and when Bo grew too old to be the aggressive, intelligent K9 deputy, he was supposed to retire into Alex's care. Relaxed and doing nothing more demanding than jogging or running hills. They should've had so many years ahead of them.

Alex buried his face against Bo's fur and wept. Of course he couldn't have left his dog at home, because Bo wanted to take the call. He lived for the chance to protect Alex, and if he hadn't jumped at the gunman, if he hadn't taken the bullet, the guy would've shot Alex point-blank in the head. Alex never would've seen it coming.

He pictured Bo's eyes, the way he had looked on the ride down the mountain to the ambulance, the loyal eyes and trusting heart, the look of apology deep within his expression — as if he had known this was good-bye. He hugged his dog once more and then straightened, his eyes too blurred with tears to see clearly.

"Bo ... you can't be gone." The words came out with his tears. "I can't let you go, boy." He hated that Bo wasn't moving, that he wasn't lifting his head. Until now there had never been a time when he would talk to Bo and Bo wouldn't look at him. "God ... please get me through this, please." He stroked his dog's side one last time. "I hope heaven has dogs, because ... because I just want one more chance to run with you, Bo. One more chance."

He couldn't stay. There was no getting Bo back, no turning the hands of the clock the other direction so he could've been standing on the front yard of that house and noticed the suspect himself, so things might've turned out

differently. It was too late for any of that. Bo was gone. His partner — his friend — was dead.

One more time he patted Bo's head, the soft place beneath his ears. For all their years together, Bo had desired Alex's praise more than food or water or air. This one last time, Alex took the moment to give his dog what he would've wanted most. He leaned close to Bo's head and whispered, "No better friend ever, Bo ... you saved my life. You did good." He patted his side. "You were a good dog, Bo ... the best. You did everything right."

He couldn't bear to step away, because when he did he would have to believe it was over, and he wouldn't have this chance again. Suddenly, he was mad at himself because he hadn't taken enough pictures. Hardly any over the years, so there would be nothing much to remember Bo by.

As soon as the thought hit his heart, he knew there wasn't an ounce of truth in it. He didn't need photographs. He would remember Bo every time he climbed into his Dodge or whenever he sped off down the streets of Los Angeles after the next crook. He would feel him sitting in the seat behind him and remember the look in his eyes as surely as he knew his own reflection. He stepped back, his fingers still spread deep into Bo's furry side. He needed to say it, because his dog deserved that much.

"Good-bye, Bo ... You were a good friend."

Then, with the weight of the world full against his shoulders, he turned and left the room, closing the door behind him. Out in the hallway, he placed his forearm against the wall and buried his face in the crook of his elbow. The tears came harder, because already he felt lonely and cold and defeated. Bo was dead. How could that be? Couldn't God have spared his dog, when Bo was so full of good?

For a few seconds, the old pain and anger crept back in around the edges of his soul, but then just as quickly he could hear his father's words as they'd been spoken to Jake Bryan. *So far, my family has had very little trouble. Life is good, love is sweet, and time seems like it'll last forever ... We all know that isn't true. Especially working for the FDNY.*

Or working as a K9 officer for the sheriff's department.

He dragged his face against his arm and turned so his back was against the wall. Once more he reminded himself of what Clay had said, that God never intended for man to rid the world of evil, but through God's strength, that man might look at the evil within himself. Bo was gone; there was nothing he could do about the fact. But there was one way he could offset the evil that had taken place over the last five hours.

He could offset it with love.

For a long minute, he examined himself, the heart and soul that had grown cold and hard within him, and he studied the person he had allowed himself to become. His love for Holly Brooks had never wavered. He knew that now. She had been his best friend, the girl who took his breath away every time he saw her. The way he'd treated her these past seven years was, itself, a form of evil.

He opened his eyes and straightened, refusing to give in to the exhaustion and grief that were spinning his head in circles and making his breathing fast and unsteady. He walked down the hall, and he could almost feel Bo there beside him, looking up at him as if to say, "This is the right thing ... let's do this."

She was still on the sofa, where she'd been sitting before, but her head was no longer in her hands. She looked at him, and in her eyes he saw fear, like maybe he would walk past without talking to her, the way he'd done so many ridiculous times that first year after the terrorist attacks. The terrorists who had pulled off 9/11 hadn't only killed his father and the other thousands of people. They'd killed him too.

But God had brought his heart and soul back to life again.

He never stopped, never broke his slow and steady stride as he made his way to her. At first she didn't want to look at him, because the grief was too raw for both of them. But then she must've seen something different in his face, because when he was halfway to her she met his eyes and didn't break contact again. When he reached her, he stopped and held out his arms.

He had so much to say, seven years' worth of words and apologies and questions about how she'd been and why she was still here. He didn't know if she was involved with someone, but it didn't matter anymore. All that mattered was that he loved her the way she deserved to be loved. Not the romantic love that might've come if he'd done things differently, but the love of days gone by, a love that cared for her still — would care for her forever.

But no matter how much he wanted to talk, he couldn't say a word. His sorrow and grief stuck in his throat and stopped him from speaking. So he did the only thing he could. He took her in his arms, slowly, with the greatest care, and he wrapped his arms around her. Alone in the waiting room, buried beneath his sorrow and hers, they stayed that way, clinging to each other until they were both crying again, silently weeping for all they'd lost in the wake of his unrelenting quest to right his father's death.

Please, God ... I can't talk ... please let her know what I'm feeling.

Her hands pressed into his back and his into hers, and still they stayed in each other's arms, neither of them willing for the moment to end. And it wouldn't end, either. Everything bitter and angry and full of hurt dissolved in wave after wave of love washing over him and leaving him intoxicated by her presence. His Holly, here ... impossibly here, where she would stay. Because whatever was happening in her personal life, now that he'd found her, now that he'd found himself, Alex wasn't letting her go. If she was in love with someone else, fine. Alex would be her friend, but he wasn't walking away again.

Not now and not ever.

Hoofstuk 29

Holly sit al lank in die wagkamer, te lank. Teen hierdie tyd moes iemand al uitgekom het en vir haar gesê het dat die hond leef, dat hy klaar geopereer is. Die stilte kan nie 'n goeie teken wees nie. Maar aangesien sy niemand het om mee te praat nie, en aangesien sy siek van bekommernis is dat Alex vasgevang is in die vuur bo-op die heuwel, gebruik sy die tyd om te bid.

Dit is vreemd hoe sy vir so baie jare 'n verhouding met God geweier het, hoe sy haar geloof laat wegsterf het tot op 'n punt dat sy nie meer wou kerk toe gaan nie en soms selfs getwyfel het of God werklik bestaan, maar hier ... nou dat sy 'n intense tragedie ervaar, omring deur die grootste vrees sedert 11 September, vind sy dit maklik om te bid.

Sy bid vir Bo en vir Alex en Alex se vriend – die ander polisieman. Toe sy dit doen, voel sy hoe nog trane oor haar wange rol en sy doen wat sy lank reeds moes gedoen het. Sy vra vir God om haar te vergewe omdat sy weggeloop het, toegelaat het dat haar liefde vir Hom wegsterf.

“Natuurlik glo ek in U, Here ... ” Sy sê die woorde sag, en toe sy dit doen, gooi dit 'n bietjie lig in die donker gange van haar siel waar die son vir te lank nie geskyn het nie. “Ek is jammer, Here ... Ek het U nodig hier by my. Asseblief, Here ... gee vir my 'n teken dat U hier is.”

Toe sy klaar gebid het, kom 'n opsigter by die leë wagkamer in. Dit voel vir Holly vreemd om so alleen te sit en huil. Sy haal 'n tissue uit haar handsak en vee onder haar oë. Daar is iets vreemds aan die opsigter, iets in sy houding en hoe hy dinge doen. Holly hou hom dop, probeer uitmaak wat dit is. Die man is klein en krom, met dun grys hare wat onder 'n pet uitsteek. Die naam op sy hemp sê “Max”.

Die man trek Holly se aandag, maar sy weet nie hoekom nie. Dit lyk nie of hy haar sien toe hy begin werk en 'n mop in 'n emmer water sit, dit uitdroog en op die vloer neersit nie. Sy kyk aandagtig na hom, probeer agterkom hoekom hy so bekend lyk, hoekom sy aksies so vreemd lyk. Hy is vyf minute besig toe hy skielik ophou en reguit na haar kyk. “Jy ... jy is 'n gelowige?”

Holly skrik toe hy dit vra. Dit voel of sy oor haar skouer wil kyk, vir ingeval hy met iemand anders praat. Maar na 'n rukkie ruk sy haarself reg en wys na haarself. "Ek?"

"Ja." Die man glimlag en weereens is daar iets vreemds omtrent hom, amper asof hy van 'n ander wêreld is. "Is jy 'n gelowige?"

"Ek is." Hierdie keer aarsel Holly nie. "Ek het nou net gebid." Haar stem klink hartseer. "Dit was 'n lang nag."

"Jy was betrokke by die brand." Dit is nie 'n vraag nie. Hy rus op die mop, sy oë kyk byna deur haar.

"Ja. Ek was." Holly wonder hoe die man dit weet. Ruik sy só erg na rook? Of is daar as op haar gesig? Sy bestudeer die man se gesig, probeer uitmaak wat aangaan. Miskien het sy hom al voorheen gesien, in die kompleks waar sy bly of in 'n winkel.

Hy glimlag vir haar, sy oë deurboor hare. "Die Here wil hê jy moet iets weet ... Hy sal jou nooit verlaat nie, jou nooit alleen laat nie. Maak nie saak wat gebeur nie, maak nie saak vir hoe lank nie."

Holly snak na haar asem en dit steek in haar keel vas. Voordat sy kan antwoord, vat die opsigter aan die rand van sy pet en skuifel in die gang af.

Die oomblik toe hy weg is, besef sy iets het verander – sy is nie meer bang nie. Sy is hartseer oor die beseerde hond en diep bekommerd oor Alex, maar sy kan die teenwoordigheid van God by haar voel, en sy onthou iets wat haar ma nie so lank terug nie vir haar gesê het. Jy hoef nie God se nabyheid te voel om te weet Hy is by jou nie. Die Bybel sê God is by ons, en dit is al bewys wat 'n mens nodig het. Gevoelens of geen gevoelens nie.

Vir jare is God al by haar, maar Holly wou nie sy teenwoordigheid aanvoel nie. Sy het Hom nie gesoek of daaraan gedink om met Hom te praat nie. Ten spyte daarvan was God by haar – op dieselfde manier as wat Hy nou heel duidelik by haar is. Sy het vir God gevra om haar te laat weet Hy is hier, en Hy het vir Max die opsigter gestuur.

Sy kyk na die ontvangstoonbank, na die twee vroue en een man in wit jasse wat op rekenaars werk. Sedert Bo ingestoot is, het sy nie weer die dokter en sy assistent gesien nie, en weereens sê dit vir Holly die situasie hou niks goeds in nie. Daar moet nuus wees oor Alex se hond, maar niemand het nog uitgekóm om met haar te praat nie. Sy bid weer, maar dan doen haar gebede iets wat sy nie verwag het dit sal nie. Dit vat haar terug tot voor 11 September, toe sy en Alex seker was van die lewe en liefde en hul toekoms.

Sy hoor 'n deur oopgaan aan die ander kant van die wagkamer. Holly kyk op en sien die dokter inkom. Hy loop stadig en sy gesig is emosieloos. Dan gaan staan hy so 'n meter van haar af. "Mejuffrou Brooks?"

Sy staan op, haar hart klop wild. Soos almal wat betrokke was by die brand is sy uitgeput en gedreineer. Sy voel duiselig toe sy na die dokter kyk en sy druk met die agterkant van haar bene teen die rusbank waarop sy gesit het. Sy kyk in die dokter se oë en sy weet, sy wéét nog voordat hy 'n woord sê.

"Ek het slegte nuus oor Bo."

Holly wil nie hê hy moet verder praat nie, want as iets met Alex se hond gebeur, sal hy dalk nooit regkom nie. Sy onthou die koerantartikel, die koue uitdrukking in Alex se oë en die hond langs hom. Holly het geen idee hoe lank hulle saamgewerk het nie, maar sy kon vanaand duidelik sien hoe lief Alex vir Bo is. Sy wil weghardloop, die wagkamer verlaat sodat iemand anders die nuus hoor. Want 'n paar uur gelede het sy haarself laat glo dat omdat hulle mekaar gevind het, Alex ook homself sal vind. Dat hulle saam die God sal vind wat hulle nooit sal verlaat nie, nooit alleen sal laat nie. Maar daardie hoop sal vir altyd weg wees as iets met Alex se hond gebeur. Maak nie saak wat die opsigter Max gesê het nie.

✧

Bo gaan dit oorleef. Teen die tyd dat Alex met sy bakkie by die dierehospitaal se parkeerarea injaag, het hy homself oortuig. Honde verloor hulle bloed baie vinniger as mense. So as die koeël hom in een van sy belangrike organe of 'n aar getref het, sou hy lankal al dood gewees het, voordat hulle by die ambulans gekom het. Terwyl hy op pad was, het hy daaraan gedink om te bel vir die nuutste inligting, maar hy het nie Holly se nommer nie, en daar was nie tyd om sy foon te gryp en dit by iemand te kry nie.

Dit was beter om net te ry en vinnig daar uit te kom.

Alex parkeer sy bakkie en hardloop met die paar trappies op tot by die voordeur. Die plek is nie baie groot nie, en die wagkamer is leeg, behalwe vir Holly en ...

Hy gaan staan en staar na die toneel wat voor hom afspeel. Holly huil. Sy staan met haar hande oor haar gesig en die dokter se hand rus op haar skouer. *Nee, Here ...* Hy tree terug, want dit kan nie besig wees om te gebeur nie. Dit is nie die einde nie. Hy gaan terughardloop na sy bakkie toe, huis toe ry, en vir Bo kry waar hy by die voordeur lê en slaap. Die hele ding is een groot fout, nie waar nie? Dit moet wees.

Holly moes hom gehoor het, want sy draai om en kyk na hom. Haar oë is rooi en opgeswel, haar gesig vertrek van verdriet.

“Nee ... ” Hy druk sy hande in sy broek se agtersakke en skud sy kop terwyl hy van haar na die dokter kyk. “Nie Bo nie ... Moenie vir my sê ... ” Hy sien vir 'n oomblik hoe die mense agter die toonbank die vertrek verlaat en agtertoe gaan. Hulle gee vir hom privaatheid sodat ... sodat ...

“Alex.” Holly se arms is voor haar gevou en sy hou haar elmboë vas, haar hele lyf ruk.

“Meneer Brady.” Die dokter loop na hom toe.

Alex skud weer sy kop en draai na die deur. Hy is nie hier nie, nie in 'n dierehospitaal met Bo êrens agter in 'n vertrek nie. Hy maak sy oë toe en gryp 'n bondeltjie van sy hare vas. Hy is nie hier nie. Hy is by hoofkantoor, en sy sersant lei hom na 'n vertrek waar 'n pragtige jong Duitse Herdershond op aandag staan, sy ore vorentoe. Die sersant sê: “Alex, ontmoet jou nuwe kollega.” Hy knip sy oë en skud sy kop, weier om na enigiemand te luister. Hy en Bo is in 'n grasveld by die opleidingsentrum, sewe honderd en tien uur

van opleiding. 'n Klomp polisiemanne gee handseine vir hulle hondekollegas, en elke hond maak droog. Elke liewe hond behalwe Bo. Dan is hy by die huis 'n paar maande later, soek die TV se afstandbeheer sodat hy die Dodgers-wedstryd kan kyk voor hy gaan slaap. Bo kom met die afstandbeheer in sy bek by die leefvertrek ingeloop, en hy draai sy kop skuins en kyk na Alex asof hy sê: "Ek is hier vir jou, my vriend. Vra net wat jy nodig het, ek is hier."

"Meneer Brady?"

Alex laat sak sy kop skuins en skud dit nog 'n laaste keer. Hy kan steeds vir Bo langs hom voel, sy hond se hare wat hom kielie toe hulle 'n paar weke gelede by Pierce College teen die bultjie op hardloop. Hy is nie seker hoe nie, maar hy kry die krag om om te draai. "Ek is jammer ..." Hy kyk die dokter in die oë. "Sê maar vir my."

Die dokter frons en hy kyk af grond toe. Toe hy opkyk, is daar geen twyfel oor wat hy gaan sê nie. "Ons het alles probeer wat ons kon. Die koeël is deur een van Bo se longe en by sy lewer in. Teen die tyd dat hy hier uitgekóm het, het hy baie bloed verloor. Maar selfs al het ons hom op die toneel geopereer, sou hy dit nie gemaak het nie. Net te veel skade. Hy is al in die teater sedert hy hier gekóm het, maar ..." Die dokter pers sy lippe op mekaar, asof hy weet hy hoef nie verder te verduidelik nie. Geen woorde sal nou meer help nie. Hy sit sy hand op Alex se skouer. "Ek is jammer."

Holly staan steeds waar sy gestaan het toe Alex by die dierehospitaal ingeloop het. Die trane rol oor haar wange en stil snikgeluide laat haar skouers ruk. Sy gaan sit weer op die stoel met haar gesig in haar hande. Alex kan nie nou aan die gesprek dink wat hy met haar moet hê nie. Hy moet nou eers die situasie met Bo hanteer.

Bo is dood. "Kan ek ..." Hy sluk. Dit is vir hom baie moeilik. "Kan ek hom sien?"

"Ja." Die dokter lyk swaarmoedig, hy beweeg rond soos mense by 'n begrafnis. Weereens voel die oomblik onrealisties. Bo is nie dood nie ... nie sy Bo nie. Hy is op die agterste sitplek van sy bakkie. Hy blaf vir die vuur en is gereed vir aksie. Sy kollega, sy vriend, sit by sy voete.

"Volg my." Die dokter loop deur 'n dubbeldeur na 'n vertrek aan die einde van die kort gangetjie. Hy maak die deur oop en laat Alex toe om alleen in te gaan. "Jy kan so lank bly as wat jy wil."

Alex knik, maar sy oë is reeds op Bo wat op die tafel lê. Hy hoor hoe die deur agter hom toe gaan, en Alex bly daar staan, hy beweeg nie. Want van hier af lyk dit of Bo net slaap. Die bekende swart en bruin kleure op sy rug lyk net soos dit 'n paar uur gelede gelyk het by die voet van sy bed toe Alex die oproep gehoor het.

Hy is waarskynlik alleen en kry koud daar op die steriele ondersoektafel. Alex stap nader en sit sy hand op Bo se sy. 'n Laken is teen sy bors vasgedruk oor die plek waar hy geskiet is, maar andersins lyk hy gesond en heel, sy gesigsuitdrukking spreek van lojaliteit en vertroue.

Alex sit sy hand op die hond se sy en begin hom vryf, stadig en ritmies. Hy is nog warm, steeds vol van die lewe wat hom gedryf het om enigiets te doen wat Alex van hom gevra het. “Bo ... jy is ’n goeie hond. ’n Goeie hond.” Hy beweeg sy hand op na Bo se kop en trek sy vingers deur die sagter hare net onder die hond se oor. “Oubaas se hond.”

’n Vloedgolf van hartseer wel in sy hart op, en Alex probeer dit nie keer nie. Hy was so gedryf om die lede van die ROA te vang, en Bo het die prys betaal. Wat meer is, hy het dit gedoen sonder dat Alex hom beveel het. Hy het na die verdagte met die geweer gehardloop voordat Alex hom gesien het. Bo het net vir een doel geleef – om na die veiligheid en welstand van sy kollega om te sien.

Alex begin huil en hy besef skielik dat hy misluk het. Hy het nie die boosheid gestop nie – nie in Los Angeles nie, nie by Oak Canyon Estates nie, en nie in sy eie lewe nie. Boosheid het hom eerder gevind en nou is sy hond dood. Hy wil skree, uitvaar teen al die boosheid in die wêreld wat toegelaat het dat ’n hond so goed en opreg soos Bo geskiet word. Maar hy kan nie hier skree nie, want die geraas sal Bo skrikmaak. Die hond haat dit as Alex kwaad word, en daar is geen rede om hom nou te ontstel nie.

Hy vryf weer oor Bo se kop, en weereens spoel ’n klomp herinneringe oor hom. Hy is op die strand, kyk na die golwe. Hy probeer homself verstaan maar kry dit nie reg nie. Tog is hy dankbaar, want Bo is in elk geval sy vriend. Bo wat langs hom sit, sy ore teruggetrek, sy oë gereed vir enige gevaar wat na Alex se kant toe kan kom. Bo is deel van elke goeie herinnering wat hy oor die afgelope drie jaar het. Bo wat agter ’n verdagte se spoor aan hardloop en die een misdadiger na die ander gelyk maak met die grond. Bo wat op die agterste sitplek saam met hom ry. Dit voel soos ’n leeftyd se avonture.

Hy moes hom vanaand by die huis gelos het. “Bo,” hy hou die hond se kop vas, druk dit teen sy bors. “Ek is jammer, my hond ... Ek is só jammer.”

Dit is nie hoe dit veronderstel is om te eindig nie. Daar lê nog jare se werk vir hom en Bo voor, en wanneer Bo te oud is om ’n aggressiewe, intelligente hond te wees, is hy veronderstel om af te tree en Alex sal vir hom sorg. Rustig te wees, sonder om iets meer veeleisend te doen as om te draf en teen bultjies uit te hardloop. Daar moes vir hulle nog soveel jare voorgelê het.

Alex druk sy gesig in Bo se hare en huil. Natuurlik kon hy nie sy hond by die huis gelos het nie, want Bo wou saamgaan. Dit was sy lewe om Alex te beskerm. En as hy nie die gewapende man omgespring het nie, as hy nie geskiet is nie, sou die man Alex in sy kop geskiet het. Hy sou Alex onkant betrap het.

Hy stel homself Bo se oë voor, hoe hy gelyk het toe hulle gery het op pad na die ambulans toe. Die lojale oë en ’n hart vol vertroue, die verskonende uitdrukking – asof hy geweet het dit is die einde. Hy druk sy hond ’n laaste keer en kom regop, sy oë te vol tranes om duidelik te sien.

“Bo ... jy kan nie weg wees nie.” Hy sê die woorde al huilende. “Ek kan jou nie laat gaan nie, my hond.” Hy haat dit dat Bo nie beweeg nie, dat hy nie sy

kop optel nie. Tot nou toe het dit nog nooit gebeur dat hy met Bo praat en hy nie na Alex kyk nie. “Here ... help my asseblief hierdeur.” Hy vryf ’n laaste keer oor sy hond se sy. “Ek hoop daar is honde in die hemel, want ... want ek wil nog ’n laaste keer saam met jou hardloop, Bo. Nog net een keer.”

Hy kan nie langer bly nie. Hy kan nie vir Bo terugbring nie, hy kan nie die tyd terugdraai sodat hy voor daardie huis kan staan en self die verdagte sien nie, sodat dinge dalk anders kan uitdraai nie. Dit is te laat daarvoor. Bo is weg. Sy kollega, sy vriend, is dood.

Hy vryf Bo se kop nog ’n keer, die sagte plek onder sy ore. In al die jare wat hulle saam gewerk het, het Bo meer van Alex se lof gehou as van kos of water of lug. Vir ’n laaste keer gee Alex vir sy hond waarvan hy die meeste sou hou. Hy leun vorentoe tot naby Bo se kop en fluister: “Jy is die beste vriend ooit, Bo ... Jy het my lewe gered. Goeie werk.” Hy vryf sy sy. “Jy was ’n goeie hond, Bo ... die beste. Jy het alles reg gedoen.”

Dit is vir hom baie swaar om om te draai, want as hy dit doen, sal hy moet glo dit is verby, en hy sal nooit weer hierdie geleentheid hê nie. Skielik is hy kwaad vir homself omdat hy nie genoeg foto’s geneem het nie. Al die jare het hy baie min geneem; daarom sal daar omtrent niks wees wat hom aan Bo kan herinner nie.

So vinnig as wat hy daaraan dink, weet hy dit is nie waar nie. Hy het nie foto’s nodig nie. Hy sal Bo onthou elke keer wanneer hy in sy bakkie klim of wanneer hy agter nog ’n misdadiger in die strate van Los Angeles aanjaag. Hy sal hom voel waar hy agter hom sit en die kyk in sy oë onthou so seker as wat hy sy eie spieëlbeeld ken. Hy tree terug, sy vingers steeds diep in Bo se pels uitgesprei. Hy moet dit sê, want sy hond verdien dit.

“Totsiens, Bo. Jy was ’n goeie vriend.”

Dan, met die wêreld op sy skouers, draai hy om en loop uit, en maak die deur agter hom toe. In die gang sit hy sy voorarm teen die muur en druk sy gesig in die hoek wat sy elmboog vorm. Die trane is nou meer, want hy voel al klaar eensaam en koud en asof die wêreld op sy skouers rus. Bo is dood. Hoe kan dit wees? Kon God nie sy hond gespaar het nie? Bo was dan so vol goedheid.

Vir ’n paar oomblikke kruip die ou pyn en woede om die hoeke van sy siel, maar net so gou hoor hy sy pa se woorde aan Jake Bryan. *My gesin het sover maar min swaarkry beleef. Die lewe is goed, die liefde wonderlik, en dit lyk of tyd vir ewig sal aanhou ... Ons almal weet dit is nie waar nie. Veral as jy vir die brandweer werk.*

Of as jy ’n polisieman by die honde-eenheid is.

Hy vryf sy gesig oor sy arm en draai om met sy rug teen die muur. Weereens herinner hy homself aan wat Clay gesê het, dat God nooit van die mens verwag om die wêreld van boosheid te red nie, maar om met God se krag na die boosheid in homself te kyk. Bo is weg; daar is niks wat hy daaraan kan doen nie. Maar daar is een manier hoe hy die boosheid van die afgelope vyf uur kan beveg.

Hy kan dit met liefde beveg.

Lank ondersoek hy homself, sy hart en siel wat koud en hard geword het, en hy bestudeer die persoon wat hy homself toegelaat het om te word. Sy liefdevir Holly Brooks het nooit minder geword nie. Dit weet hy nou. Sy was sy beste vriend, die meisie wat sy asem weggeslaan het elke keer wat hy haar gesien het. Die manier hoe hy haar die afgelope sewe jaar behandel het, is ook 'n vorm van boosheid.

Hy maak sy oë oop, staan regop, weier om ineen te stort as gevolg van die uitputting en hartseer wat sy kop laat draai en hom vinnig en oneweredig laat asem haal. Hy loop met die gang af, en hy kan amper vir Bo langs hom voel, sien hoe hy opkyk asof hy sê: “Dit is die regte ding ... kom ons doen dit.”

Sy sit steeds op die rusbank waar sy vroeër gesit het, maar haar kop is nie meer in haar hande nie. Sy kyk na hom, en in haar oë sien hy vrees, asof hy verby haar gaan loop sonder om met haar te praat, soos hy soveel kere gedoen het gedurende die paar jare na die terroriste-aanvalle. Die terroriste wat vir 11 September verantwoordelik was, het nie net sy pa en duisende ander mense doodgemaak nie. Hulle het hom óók doodgemaak.

Maar God het sy hart en siel weer laat lewe.

Hy gaan staan nie, loop net stadig en ritmies na haar toe. Eers wil sy nie na hom kyk nie, want die hartseer is te rou vir albei van hulle. Maar dan sien sy seker sy gesigsuitdrukking het verander, want toe hy halfpad is, kyk sy in sy oë, sonder om een keer weg te kyk. Toe hy by haar is, gaan staan hy, en hou sy arms oop.

Hy het so baie om te sê. Sewe jaar se woorde, jammer-sê en vrae oor hoe dit met haar gaan en hoekom sy steeds hier is. Hy weet nie of sy 'n verhouding met iemand het nie, maar dit maak nie meer saak nie. Al wat saak maak, is dat hy vir haar lief is soos sy liefgehê behoort te word. Nie die romantiese liefde wat hy sou voel as hy dinge anders gedoen het nie, maar verlore liefde, liefde wat vir haar omgee, wat vir altyd vir haar sal omgee.

Maar maak nie saak hoe graag hy wil praat nie, hy kry nie 'n woord uit nie. Sy hartseer en rou steek in sy keel vas en keer sy woorde. Daarom doen hy die enigste ding wat hy kan doen. Hy trek haar stadig nader in sy arms. Alleen staan hulle in die wagkamer, toegevoe in hulle hartseer, en hulle hou mekaar vas totdat hulle al twee weer huil, tranes stort oor alles wat hulle verloor het as gevolg van sy onverbiddelelike strewe om sy pa se dood te regverdig.

Asseblief, Here ... Ek kan nie praat nie. Laat haar asseblief weet hoe ek voel.

Haar hande druk teen sy rug en syne teen hare, en hulle bly in mekaar se arms. Nie een van hulle wil hê die oomblik moet verbygaan nie. En dit gaan ook nie eindig nie. Alles wat bitter en kwaad en seer is, verdwyn in die een golf van liefde ná die ander wat oor hom spoel en hom bedwelms laat deur haar teenwoordigheid. Sy Holly is hier ... en dit is byna onmoontlik. Maar dit is hier waar sy gaan bly. Want wat ook al in haar persoonlike lewe gebeur, noudat hy haar gekry het, noudat hy homself gevind het, gaan Alex haar nie laat gaan nie. As sy verlief is op iemand anders, is dit reg so. Alex sal haar vriend wees, maar hy gaan nie weer weglou nie. Nie nou nie. Nooit weer nie.

THIRTY

Holly wore dark sunglasses and sat at the end of a middle row in the sea of folding chairs that were lined across the grassy field at the sheriff's headquarters. Jamie Michaels was to her right, and Jamie's kids and in-laws filled out the row. Alex was in front with the other K9 officers. Tissue packets had been handed out as the hundreds of people arrived, and Holly was grateful. It was Alex's friend Clay's turn at the microphone. His arm was in a sling because of the bullet he'd taken to the shoulder, but he was okay. The whole city knew the story by now.

Three days had passed since that awful night, and the fires set by the arsonists were almost completely contained. Oak Canyon Estates was a complete loss, but everyone agreed the damage could've been much worse. The newspapers and local television stations had all remarked that only a miracle could've caused the shift in winds that saved every house at the bottom of the hill below where the fires had been set. "If I didn't know better, I'd say we saw the hand of God at work tonight," one reporter stated. Alex didn't have to wonder. Of course the miracle of the wind shift was the hand of God. Alex had witnessed it firsthand.

No more winds were expected, so the worst of the firestorm was behind them. At least for this season. As Clay made his way up, Holly stared at the picture of Alex and Bo, the one that had run in the newspaper. Someone had enlarged it and framed it on an easel near the platform. Already they'd heard from a dozen K9 and SWAT deputies about Bo's bravery and innate ability to get the crooks. But Jamie had told her before the service that none of them knew Alex and Bo the way Clay did.

Clay took his spot and looked out at the crowd. "This is hard." His voice rang with transparent grief. "Bo was a good dog." He looked down for a few seconds, and when he had composed himself, he continued. "Most of you know ... a very unique friendship exists between a K9 officer and his service dog. In the case of Bo and Alex, that dog knew every emotion, every nuance and move his partner made. Everyone who saw them together understood that even among police dogs, Bo was a rare treasure. A dog whose loyalty and commitment to getting the bad guys knew no limits." Clay spoke clearly, and

his voice carried across the field. “The same way it was for Alex.” He launched into a story, something funny about Bo being lost during a chase, and Alex finding him on the hood of the squad car, waiting and watching for his partner. The story was long, and it gave Holly a chance to fade out for a few minutes. She let her eyes find the back of Alex’s head, his dark blond hair and strong shoulders. He had filled out since high school, and he was more handsome than before. More chiseled. But in the days since their hug, he had barely spoken to her.

She’d been busy, of course. There had been the trip back to the site of the fire and the surprise arrival of a dozen contractors with earthmoving equipment. Each of them had taken part in one of Dave Jacobs’ charity home-building projects, and now that Dave was in need, they all showed up to help — not expecting anything in return. The story offered beauty amidst the ashes and was picked up by the *Los Angeles Times*.

The next day Holly had a lengthy meeting with Dave and Ron Jacobs, so that she could share every detail about what had happened that fateful night. A debriefing, Ron called it. At the end, Dave came to her and hugged her the way her father used to hug her. “You were very brave, Holly.” He pulled back, his eyes shining. “I’m so glad you weren’t hurt.”

Holly thanked him, and the moment eased the feeling of tension between her and Ron. They had not shared a private moment since the conversation they’d had in the midst of the fire, and it seemed clear to both of them that their dating days were over. Ron was a good man. He and his father would rebound from this and find something new and better to be a part of — whether they rebuilt at Oak Canyon or not.

At the end of the meeting, Holly turned in her resignation. She needed something new, maybe a job with a magazine or a newspaper. Selling houses would never be the same after the horrifying terror of that night, and besides, maybe it was time for her and her mom to sell their condos and move somewhere new. San Diego, or back to New York City, maybe.

Especially now that it looked like she’d lost Alex again.

Holly blinked and focused on him once more. If it weren’t for Bo, Alex would be dead now. Clay would be at the podium talking about him and not his dog. Holly couldn’t stand the thought. She remembered what it felt like to be in his arms the other night and how she had known with everything in her that she still loved Alex Brady.

She would love him until the day she died. Which was all the more reason why she couldn’t stay around. The possibility of running into him was too great. If she was ever going to have a chance to move on, then first she needed

to move away from Los Angeles as soon as possible. Her heart would follow in time.

Alex turned his head just enough that she could see the rugged muscles along the side of his face. He hadn't cried during the ceremony, and that was another sign that maybe the Alex she wanted him to be was gone once again, lost even farther than before because of this new injustice in his life.

Be with him, God ... life's too short to spend it angry and driven. She longed for him, ached for him to look at her like he'd looked at her that night in the veterinary hospital, but she hadn't seen him again until an hour ago. In that moment, there wasn't even a flicker of the depth and connection she'd felt in the vet's waiting room. *Help him, God ... let him find the strength to let his feelings show again.*

This was new, this ability to pray as easily as she'd prayed back in high school. It was something good that had come from the terrible firestorm, and Holly was grateful. Whatever the future held, she couldn't imagine taking it on without God's wisdom and protection, His guidance and promise of eternity. If she couldn't have Alex, her faith would sustain her. It was something her mother had prayed about for years, and it would bring the two of them closer, as well.

Clay was finishing up, and after he sat back down, the sergeant of the K9 division said a few more words and then closed the ceremony with a prayer, asking God for continued protection and guidance for Alex and all the deputies in the sheriff's department, and thanking the Lord for the courage of police dogs like Bo.

A quartet of bagpipe players started a haunting rendition of "Amazing Grace" as the procession of officers filed from the seats and back into the meeting room inside headquarters. A reception had been prepared by one of the churches in town, so that the K9 and SWAT guys could talk about the loss and share memories of Bo and his heroic feats. His and Alex's.

"You staying here?" Jamie put her hand over Holly's as she stood with the others in their row.

"For awhile." She looked at Alex and gave a light shrug with one shoulder. "I'm not sure if he wants to talk, but I want to be close ... just in case."

Jamie hesitated, her expression kind and sincere. "Clay and I'll be praying for you."

"Thank you." Holly smiled. "I hope we can see each other again."

"Me too." Jamie took hold of her kids' hands, and together with her family

they walked across the grass toward the reception.

While the bagpipers finished up, a few of the deputies stayed and gathered around Alex, talking to him, patting him on the back, hugging him. Holly watched as Jamie came back outside and handed Alex a package. The two talked for a minute, and then Jamie gave him a quick hug and returned to the building with the others.

Eventually, Alex and Holly were the only two left outside. Alex didn't seem to notice she was there. He walked slowly toward the photo and lifted it off the easel. He stayed that way for a long time, looking at the picture.

Suddenly, Holly felt awkward and out of place. She should probably leave now, before he turned around and saw her there by herself. That way he wouldn't feel like he had to come over and talk to her. Because if he'd meant everything she'd felt from him that night in the vet's waiting room, he would've found a way to talk to her by now, maybe not by phone — since he didn't have her number — but here at the service, at least. She started to stand. This was no place for her, here alone with Alex. She'd been rejected by him too many times to let it happen again.

She turned and started to walk silently back toward the parking lot, but she only got a few feet before she heard him call out to her.

“Holly ... wait!”

At the sound of his voice, she turned around. Fifty yards of grass and chairs separated them, but even this far away she thought she could hear a softness in his tone. She stared at him, waiting.

When he seemed sure she wasn't leaving, he set the package from Jamie on a chair and returned the photo back to its place. Then he let his hands fall to his sides, and slowly he walked up the center aisle toward her. The closer he came, the better she could see his eyes, and for a heartbeat she thought they were back to the way they'd been the other night. But in the glare of afternoon sun and through the tint of her glasses, she couldn't let herself believe that, not when her heart was dying inside her.

But with each step, he never once broke eye contact, and when he was only a few feet from her she didn't have to wonder anymore. The man walking up to her wasn't the angry closed-off sheriff's deputy. He wasn't the broken teenager bent on revenging his father's death. He was just Alex. The Alex she wasn't sure she'd ever see again.

Hoofstuk 30

Holly het 'n donkerbril op en sit op die punt van een van die middelste rye in die see van opvoustoel op die grasperk by die polisie se hoofkantoor. Jamie sit aan haar regterkant, saam met haar kinders en skoonfamilie. Alex sit voor saam met die ander polisiemanne van die honde-eenheid. Hulle het pakkies tissues uitgedeel vir die honderde mense wat opgedaag het, en Holly is dankbaar daaroor. Dit is Alex se vriend Clay se beurt voor die mikrofoon. Sy arm is in 'n hangverband as gevolg van die skietwond in sy skouer, maar verder gaan dit goed met hom. Die hele stad weet teen hierdie tyd wat gebeur het.

Drie dae is verby sedert die aaklige nag, en die brande is nou byna heeltemal geblus. Oak Canyon Estates het tot op die grond afgebrand, maar almal stem saam dat die skade baie erger kon gewees het. Die koerante en plaaslike TV-stasies het almal die opmerking gemaak dat net 'n wonderwerk die wind kon laat draai het sodat al die huise aan die voet van die heuwel waar die brand gestig is, ongedeerd gelaat is. “As ek nie van beter geweet het nie, sou ek sê dat ons vanaand God se hand aan die werk gesien het,” het een verslaggewer gesê. Alex hoef nie te wonder nie. Natuurlik was dit 'n wonderwerk van God wat die wind van rigting laat verander het. Hy het dit eerstehands beleef.

Daar word nie nog wind verwag nie, so die ergste van die vuurstorm is iets van die verlede. Ten minste wat dié seisoen betref. Terwyl Clay na die mikrofoon loop, staar Holly na die foto van Alex en Bo, die een wat in die koerant was. Iemand het dit vergroot en geraam. Dit staan op 'n esel naby die platform. Daar het al baie polisiemanne van die honde-eenheid en SWAT gepraat oor hoe dapper Bo was en sy aangebore vermoë om skelms te vang. Maar Jamie het voor die diens vir haar gesê dat niemand vir Alex en Bo geken het soos Clay nie.

Clay gaan staan agter die mikrofoon en kyk na die gehoor. “Dis vir my baie moeilik.” Die hartseer is duidelik in sy stem te hoor. “Bo was 'n goeie hond.” Hy kyk vir 'n paar sekondes af, en toe hy sy emosies onder beheer het, gaan hy voort. “Die meeste van julle weet ... dat daar 'n baie unieke vriendskap tussen 'n polisieman van die honde-eenheid en sy hond bestaan. In Bo en Alex se geval het die hond elke emosie, elke nuanse en elke beweging geken wat sy kollega gemaak het. Almal wat hulle saam sien werk het, verstaan dat Bo selfs onder polisiehonde 'n rare skat was. 'n Hond wie se lojaliteit en toegewydheid om skelms te vang geen grense geken het nie.”

Clay praat duidelik, en sy stem dra oor die oopte. “Dieselfde kan van Alex gesê word.” Hy begin met 'n storie, iets snaaks oor Bo wat weggeraak het nadat hulle 'n skelm agternagesit het, en Alex wat hom op die polisiemotor se enjinkap gekry het waar hy lê en wag het, op die uitkyk vir sy baas. Dit is 'n lang storie en gee vir Holly die geleentheid om vir 'n oomblik aan iets anders te dink. Haar oë vind Alex se agterkop, sy donker blonde hare en sterk skouers. Hy is sterker sedert sy hoërskooldae en baie aantrekliker. Met fynbesnede gelaatstrekke. Maar sedert hul omhelsing het hy skaars twee

woorde met haar gepraat.

Sy was natuurlik besig. Daar was die uitstappie terug na die toneel van die brand en die dosyne kontrakteurs met stootskrapers wat onverwags opgedaag het. Hulle almal het gehelp met een van Dave Jacobs se liefdadigheidsprojekte om huise te bou, en noudat Dave hulp nodig gehad het, het hulle almal opgedaag om te help, sonder om enige vergoeding te verwag. Die storie het iets moois uit die as laat verrys en is deur die *Los Angeles Times* opgeraap.

Die volgende dag het Holly 'n lang vergadering met Dave en Ron Jacobs gehad sodat sy vir hulle presies kon vertel wat daardie noodlottige aand gebeur het. Ron het dit 'n ondervraging genoem. Daarna het Dave na haar toe gekom en vir haar 'n drukkie gegee soos haar pa haar altyd gedoen het. "Jy was baie dapper, Holly." Hy het teruggestaan, sy oë het geblink. "Ek is so bly jy het nie seergekry nie."

Holly het vir hom dankie gesê en die oomblik het die spanning tussen haar en Ron effens verlig. Hulle het nog nie weer met mekaar gepraat na die gesprek wat hulle ten tyde van die brand gehad het nie, en dit was vir albei van hulle duidelik dat hulle dae as paartjie getel is. Ron is 'n goeie man. Hy en sy pa sal die terugslag oorleef en iets nuuts en beters kry om te doen, of hulle Oak Canyon herbou al dan nie.

Aan die einde van die vergadering het Holly haar bedanking ingegee. Sy het iets nuuts nodig, miskien 'n werk by 'n tydskrif of 'n koerant. Om huise te verkoop sal nooit weer dieselfde wees na die gruwelike ervaring van daardie nag nie, en miskien is dit in elk geval vir haar en haar ma tyd om hulle huise te verkoop en te verhuis. San Diego toe, of miskien terug New York toe.

Veral noudat dit lyk of sy weer vir Alex verloor het.

Holly knip haar oë en fokus weer op hom. As dit nie vir Bo was nie, sou Alex nou dood gewees het. Clay sou op die podium gestaan het en oor hom gepraat het, nie sy hond nie. Holly kan haarself dit nie indink nie. Sy onthou hoe dit nou die aand gevoel het om in sy arms te wees en hoe sy met haar hele wese geweet het sy is steeds lief vir Alex Brady.

Sy sal lief wees vir hom tot die dag dat sy sterf. En dit is nog 'n rede hoekom sy nie kan bly nie. Die moontlikheid om hom weer raak te loop, is te groot. As sy ooit die kans wil hê om aan te beweeg, moet sy so gou moontlik wegtrek uit Los Angeles. Haar hart sal haar wel volg.

Alex draai sy gesig net genoeg sodat sy die spiertjies aan die kant van sy gesig kan sien. Hy het nog nie tydens die seremonie gehuil nie, en dit is dalk nog 'n teken dat die Alex wat sy wil hê hy moet wees, weereens weg is, meer verlore as vantevore as gevolg van hierdie nuwe onregverdigheid in sy lewe.

Wees asseblief by hom, Here ... Die lewe is te kort om so kwaad en gedrewe te leef. Sy wens so dat hy na haar sal kyk soos hy nou die aand by die dierehospitaal na haar gekyk het, maar sy het hom nie weer gesien tot 'n uur gelede nie. Toe was daar nie eers 'n teken van die diepte en band wat sy in die veearts se wagkamer gevoel het nie. *Help hom, Here ... Gee vir hom die krag om weer sy gevoelens te wys.*

Dit is iets nuuts, haar vermoë om so maklik te bid soos sy op hoërskool gebid het. Dit is iets goeds wat uit die aaklige vuurstorm gekom het, en Holly is dankbaar daaroor. Wat die toekoms ook al inhou, sy kan haar nie voorstel om dit sonder God se wysheid en beskerming, sy leiding en die belofte van die ewigheid aan te pak nie. As sy nie vir Alex kan kry nie, sal haar geloof haar staande hou. Dit is iets waaroor haar ma vir jare gebid het, en dit sal hulle twee nader aan mekaar bring.

Clay is besig om af te sluit, en nadat hy gaan sit het, sê die sersant van die honde-eenheid nog 'n paar woorde en sluit dan die seremonie met 'n gebed af. Hy vra vir God om hulle steeds te beskerm en vir leiding vir Alex en al die polisiemanne. Hy sê ook vir die Here dankie vir dapper polisiehonde soos Bo. Terwyl die prosesie polisiemanne van hulle stoele af opstaan en terugbeweeg na die bymekaarkomplek in die hoofkantoor, speel 'n kwartet saksofoonspelers 'n vertolking van "Amazing Grace" wat 'n mens hoendervleis gee. 'n Onthaal is voorberei deur een van die kerke in die stad, sodat die polisiemanne van die honde-eenheid en die SWAT-lede oor die verlies kan praat en herinneringe deel van Bo en sy heroïese heldedade. Syne en Alex s'n.

"Bly jy hier?" Jamie sit haar hand op Holly s'n toe sy saam met die ander mense in die ry opstaan.

"Vir 'n rukkie." Sy kyk na Alex en lig haar een skouer effens op. "Ek is nie seker of hy wil praat nie, maar ek wil hier naby wees ... net vir ingeval."

Jamie aarsel, haar gesigsuitdrukking vriendelik en opreg. "Ek en Clay sal vir jou bid."

"Dankie." Holly glimlag. "Ek hoop ons sien mekaar weer."

"Ek ook." Jamie vat haar kinders se hande, en loop saam met haar gesin oor die grasperk in die rigting van die onthaal.

Terwyl die saksofoonspelers die laaste note speel, drom 'n paar van die polisiemanne saam om Alex, praat met hom, klop hom op die skouer, omhels hom. Holly sien hoe Jamie terugkom en vir Alex 'n pakkie gee. Die twee van hulle praat vir 'n rukkie, en dan gee Jamie vir hom 'n vinnige drukkie en gaan terug in die gebou in saam met die ander.

Uiteindelik is Alex en Holly die enigste twee mense buite. Dit lyk nie of Alex sien sy is daar nie. Hy loop stadig na die foto toe en tel dit van die esel af op. Hy staan 'n lang ruk so en kyk na die foto.

Skielik voel Holly ongemaklik en uit haar plek. Sy moet seker nou maar loop, voordat hy omdraai en haar alleen sien sit. Dan sal hy nie gedwing voel om met haar te kom praat nie. Want as hy alles bedoel het wat sy nou die aand in die veearts se wagkamer van hom aangevoel het, sou hy nou al met haar gepraat het. Dalk nie oor die telefoon nie aangesien hy nie haar nommer het nie, maar ten minste hier by die diens. Sy staan op. Dit is nie haar plek om hier alleen saam met Alex te wees nie. Hy het haar al te veel kere vantevore verwerp dat sy weer gaan toelaat dat dit gebeur.

Sy draai om en begin saggies terugloop na die parkeerarea. Maar sy gee net 'n

paar tree toe sy hom hoor roep.

“Holly ... wag!”

Toe sy hom hoor, draai sy om. Daar is ’n groot stuk grasperk en stoele tussen hulle, maar selfs so ver van hom is sy seker sy hoor ’n sagtheid in sy stem. Sy staar na hom en wag.

Toe dit lyk of hy seker is sy gaan nie loop nie, sit hy die pakkie wat Jamie vir hom gegee het op ’n stoel neer en die foto op sy plek. Dan laat hang hy sy hande langs sy sye en loop stadig in die middelste gangetjie af na haar toe. Hoe nader hy kom, hoe beter kan sy sy oë sien, en vir ’n oomblik dink sy dinge is soos dit nou die aand was. Maar in die gloed van die middagson en deur die donkerbril, kan sy haarself nie sover kry om dit te glo nie, nie terwyl haar hart besig is om dood te gaan nie.

Maar met elke tree wat hy gee, behou hy oogkontak, en toe hy net ’n paar tree van haar af is, hoef sy nie meer te wonder nie. Die man wat na haar toe loop, is nie die kwaai, geslote polisieman nie. Hy is nie die gebroke tiener wat wil wraak neem oor sy pa se dood nie. Hy is net Alex. Die Alex wat sy nie gedink het sy ooit weer sal sien nie.

THIRTY-ONE

Throughout the service, Alex had refused to let himself think about Holly. He knew she was sitting back there with Jamie, but his heart couldn't process everything happening around him. In the past five years, he'd sat in on memorial services for two police dogs and three deputies from across the state. Always he would sit shoulder-to-shoulder with the other deputies. Always he could picture the service being for him, because that was the sort of cop he was, the type that went all out for every call.

But Bo?

Sure, his dog had a knick in his ear where he'd nearly taken a bullet before, and even in the weeks leading up to his death he had made a number of death-defying captures of bad guys. But Bo was so good, so fiercely determined to take care of the crime scene, that Alex had never imagined him being killed in action.

Never imagined a service like this for his very own dog.

So before he could think about Holly, he had to have this time for Bo. His dog deserved his complete attention, the good-bye he had earned. His remains had been cremated, and Alex planned to let them go on a wave at Malibu beach — where he would always see Bo running along behind him in the shallow surf.

None of that was mentioned at the service, though, because the focus wasn't on Bo's death, but on his life. Alex appreciated every story, every officer who took the time to share about Bo. He could've stood up there and told stories till dark, but those were the moments he'd keep forever inside him. What mattered here is that other people knew about Bo. The people who had come to say good-bye to his dog would leave the service knowing him a little better. And that was worth something.

Strange how the service had played out. He could practically feel Bo lying on the ground at his feet, the way the dogs of the other K9 officers were lying near their partners. If he didn't look down, if he didn't check the photo on the easel or pay too close attention to what was being said, he could pretend for a little while longer that it had never happened, that Bo was still there. If only

he didn't look down.

But as the program ended and the bagpipes stopped playing, the truth was as painful as it was obvious. Bo was gone. As the other deputies and the bagpipers cleared out, he talked to God about all he was feeling, and a truth settled in around the broken pieces of his heart.

If — in the minute before his sergeant had introduced him to Bo — someone would've told him that the ride would be far too short, that it would end tragically and before either of them had the chance to work together all the years they should, Alex wouldn't have changed a thing. Working with Bo for the years he did made him one of the lucky ones. Both of them would've done it all again without hesitation.

He'd talked to his sergeant about the next chapter in his life as a sheriff's deputy, and he'd made a decision for now. He didn't want to work with a new K9 partner. Instead, he wanted to work SWAT with Clay and Joe and maybe someday down the road he would think about having another dog. God had spared him from the inferno for a reason, and police work had to be at least part of it. Maybe even K9 work at some point, but it would take time. He would always compare any other dog to Bo, and that wouldn't be fair — not for either of them.

Now, though, the service was over and he was lost in the moment, staring at one of the only pictures of Bo and him, when he heard the faintest sound from the back of the set of chairs. He turned just as Holly was leaving, and panic grabbed at him. What was he doing? He hadn't made his intentions clear to her, hadn't told her that he wanted to stay in her life now that they'd found each other again, or that his faith had been restored. For all she knew, he was the same Alex he'd been before the fire.

And so he set down the picture and the package and went to her, praying as he walked that she might see in his eyes the truth about who he was now, who he had become again. He had learned so much about evil, what he could do about it and what he couldn't. He couldn't stop a bullet or rid the city of every crook or terrorist that came along. He would get rid of as much evil as he could, but he would also remember that evil won most when it won in his heart.

Something he would never let it do again.

He came to her slowly, and with every step the walls and years and distance between them faded away. When he was so close he could smell the scent of the shampoo she used in her hair, he stopped and looked at her, looked into the deepest parts of her.

"Alex ... is it really you?" Her words came out as a whisper. She took off her

sunglasses, and unshed tears made her eyes sparkle in the sunlight.

They'd hugged the other day, but they hadn't held hands since the day before 9/11. Sometimes Alex would be driving in his squad car, patrolling the streets of LA, and he'd remember the sensation of her hands in his with such force that it took his breath. He still didn't have any idea whether she had a boyfriend or even a fiancé, but no one could touch what they'd shared all those years ago. So now, when words could never capture the extent of his feelings, he did the only thing he knew to do.

He held out his hands.

Holly made a soft sound that was more cry than laughter, but she must've understood what he was feeling because she took a step closer and slowly, tenderly wove her fingers between his. The sensation was magic, and it lifted everything he had ever felt for her to a higher degree that almost frightened him. He didn't want to ask, but he couldn't wait much longer. He could feel himself falling beyond anything he'd ever felt before. "Is ... is there someone in your life, Holly?"

She kept looking deeper into his eyes. "No." She seemed tentative, as if she didn't believe this was really happening here, now. "You?"

"No one. Never."

Her fingers pressed in a little deeper between his. "Me neither."

He could smell the sweetness of her skin, and all he wanted was to take her in his arms and kiss her, so she would know without a doubt how he felt about her. But first he had to at least try to make himself understood. "I ... I became someone else after my dad died in that tower."

"I know." A well of sadness rang in her voice, and she smiled through fresh tears. "I watched it happen, remember?"

He eased one of his hands free, and with his thumb he brushed back a piece of her blonde hair. "I'm sorry, Holly. I was blinded by what happened." He put his hand over his chest. "But in here, you never left me." He placed his fingers along the side of her face. "You were always in my heart."

"Right next to you." With her free hand, she gently touched the muscles in his jawline. "Because you — the Alex I knew — were always inside your heart too. No matter how hard you tried to become someone who didn't care." She tilted her head, her eyes beyond tender now. "I never stopped loving you, Alex. I always believed someday I'd find you again."

"Holly ..."

Bittersweet joy rushed through his veins and swelled his heart,

filling him with feelings he hadn't known before this moment. But he didn't celebrate just yet. "It would've been so easy for you to forget me, move on. I'm sorry." He worked his fingers into the soft hair at the nape of her neck. "Can you ever forgive me?"

There was only the two of them and nothing else. Not the planes overhead or the traffic on the busy streets outside headquarters. Not the chairs or the memorial service or any of it. Holly's sad smile was as familiar as home. "No, Alex."

"No?" His heart pounded, and her nearness made his breathing faster than before.

Her smile faded, but her eyes had never loved him more. "No, you could never have been easy to forget." She blinked back the shine in her eyes. "And, yes, I forgive you."

It was going to happen. He was going to kiss her like some scene from a distant dream. Alex searched her eyes, her face. His body trembled from the intense love he felt in that moment. "I've never loved anyone but you. I tried, but a part of me never stopped." Then, because he couldn't force his brain to think of another coherent word until he did what he was longing to do, he touched his lips to hers and, in a dance as old as time, they came together, lost in the moment, lost in each other.

The kiss lasted a long time, but it wasn't one of crazy passion or physical desire — although that place wasn't far off. Instead, it was a kiss that erased the years and doubts and told of a love neither of them had forgotten. He tasted her tears as the kiss grew, and when finally they eased back and caught their breath, his cheeks were wet too.

She wiped them with the softest touch of her thumb. "I'm sorry ... about Bo."

Alex sucked in a quick breath and lifted his chin, his eyes on the blue sky overhead. "He was a good partner."

"I wish I'd known him longer." She sniffed and hugged him, swaying just a little as they allowed the memory of the dog to stand with them for a moment.

Again Alex wished he had more tangible ways to remember Bo, something he could've shared with Holly. Then he remembered Jamie's gift. She'd given him a package and said something about not being sure if Alex had anything like it. "Wait," he eased free of her embrace and took hold of her hand. "Come with me. I need to open Jamie's package."

Holly kept up with him, her fingers still laced between his, the feeling something Alex never wanted to lose again. They reached the first row, and

Alex let go briefly so he could open the gift. Holly stayed by his side, watching, waiting.

He lifted the lid of a white box, and inside, beneath a few pieces of tissue paper, was a framed collage that made Alex catch his breath. The pictures in the frame were several beautiful shots of him and Bo on the Michaels' front porch, and one amazing photo of Bo all by himself. Regal and loyal, his eyes exactly as Alex would always remember them. The moment came rushing back, Jamie's awkward picture-taking so she could find a way to talk to him about his past. He had been grateful since then for the risks she'd taken, for giving him the copied page from Jake's journal, and playing a part in helping him find his way back to the Lord.

But he'd forgotten about the pictures until now.

"He looks so strong, so beautiful." Holly touched the side of the frame. "These are amazing."

"I ... I didn't think there were any pictures like this." Alex covered the frame with the tissue papers again. He would thank Jamie later, Jamie and Clay, and Joe and his wife — because all of them had prayed for him to find his way back. He knew that from conversations he'd had with Clay in the last few days.

As he fit the lid back on the box, his fingers brushed against hers, and electricity shot through him. He framed her face with his hand and kissed her again. "I can't believe this is happening."

"Only God could've done this." She kissed him again, more slowly than before. Then they collected the gift from Jamie and the framed photo on the easel and headed inside.

As they walked, Alex marveled at the goodness of God, who had given him the most wonderful parents, and a dog he would remember forever. God who had helped him understand that the condition of his heart was far more critical than the condition of the world, and who had spared him from certain death in the midst of towering flames. But beyond all that, he marveled that God would give him this.

A second chance with Holly.

Hoofstuk 31

Die hele diens deur verbied Alex homself om aan Holly te dink. Hy weet sy sit agter hom saam met Jamie, maar sy hart kan nie alles verwerk wat rondom

hom gebeur nie. In die afgelope vyf jaar was hy by roudienste vir twee polisiehonde en drie polisiemanne van oor die staat heen. Hy het altyd sy aan sy met die ander polisiemanne gesit en hom voorgestel dat die diens vir hom is, omdat hy die tipe polisieman is wat hy is. Een wat alles gee elke keer wat hy uitgeroep word.

Maar Bo?

Ja, daar is 'n deeltjie uit sy hond se oor omdat hy voorheen amper geskiet is, en selfs in die weke voor sy dood het hy 'n paar skelms gevang wat hom byna sy lewe gekos het. Maar Bo was so goed, so vasberade om die misdaadtoneel te hanteer, dat Alex hom nooit voorgestel het dat Bo aan diens sou sterf nie.

Hy het hom nooit 'n diens soos hierdie vir sy eie hond voorgestel nie.

Voordat hy dus aan Holly kan dink, moet hy hierdie tydjie aan Bo afstaan. Sy hond verdien al sy aandag, dat hy vir hom totsiens sê. Hy is veras, en Alex is van plan om die as oor 'n brander by Malibu-strand uit te strooi. Daar waar hy altyd vir Bo agter hom in die vlak brandertjies sal sien aanhardloop.

Niks hiervan word egter by die diens genoem nie, want die fokus is nie op Bo se dood nie, maar op sy lewe. Alex waardeer elke storie, elke polisieman wat iets oor Bo deel. Hy kon daarbo gestaan het en tot vanaand stories vertel het, maar dit is oomblikke wat hy vir altyd sal onthou. Wat saak maak, is dat ander mense Bo leer ken. Die mense wat gekom het om vir sy hond totsiens te sê sal hom na die diens 'n bietjie beter ken. En dít is wat saak maak.

Dit is vreemd hoe die diens verloop. Hy kan byna voel hoe Bo langs sy voete lê, soos die honde van die ander polisiemanne wat naby hulle kollegas lê. As hy nie afkyk nie, as hy nie na die foto op die esel kyk of konsentreer op wat gesê word nie, kan hy hom vir nog 'n rukkie voorstel dat dit nooit gebeur het nie, dat Bo steeds hier is. As hy net nie afkyk nie.

Maar nou dat die program ten einde loop en die saksofone ophou speel, is die waarheid pynlik maar duidelik. Bo is weg. Toe die ander polisiemanne en die saksofoonspelers wegbeweeg, praat hy met God oor hoe hy voel, en daar is 'n waarheid wat hy tussen die gebreekte stukkies van sy hart voel.

As iemand vir hom 'n paar minute voordat sy sersant Bo aan hom voorgestel het, sou sê dat hulle lewe saam so kort sou wees, dat dit tragies tot 'n einde sou kom voordat hulle die kans gehad het om al die jare wat hulle moes saam te werk, sou Alex niks verander het nie. Om vir 'n paar jaar saam met Bo te gewerk het, maak hom een van die gelukkigstes. Albei van hulle sou dit weer doen sonder om twee keer te dink.

Hy het met sy sersant gepraat oor wat die toekoms vir hom as polisieman inhou, en hy het vir nou besluit: Hy wil nie saam met 'n nuwe hond werk nie. Hy wil eerder saam met die SWAT-offisiere werk, saam met Clay en Joe. Miskien sal hy oor 'n paar jaar daaraan dink om weer 'n hond te hê. God het hom vir 'n rede uit die brand gered, en polisiewerk moet tog deel wees daarvan. Miskien selfs weer saam met 'n hond werk, maar dit gaan tyd neem. Hy sal altyd enige ander hond met Bo vergelyk, en dit is onregverdig – vir albei van hulle.

Die diens is nou verby en hy raak verlore in die oomblik. Hy staar na een van die enigste foto's van hom en Bo toe hy vanuit die stoele agter hom 'n sagte geluid hoor. Hy draai om net toe Holly loop, en paniek neem van hom beheer. Wat doen hy? Hy het nie sy bedoelings vir haar duidelik gemaak nie. Hy het nie vir haar gesê dat hy deel van haar lewe wil bly noudat hulle mekaar weer gevind het nie, of dat sy geloof herstel is nie. Sy dink dalk hy is steeds dieselfde Alex wat hy voor die brand was.

Hy sit die foto en die pakkie neer en loop na haar toe. Terwyl hy loop, bid hy dat sy die waarheid oor wie hy nou is, wie hy geword het, in sy oë sal sien. Hy het soveel oor boosheid geleer, wat hy daaromtrent kan doen en wat nie. Hy kan nie 'n geweerskoot keer of die stad teen elke skelm of terroris beskerm nie. Hy sal van soveel boosheid moontlik ontslae raak, maar hy sal onthou dat dit hoogty vier wanneer dit in jou hart seëvier.

Iets wat hy nooit weer sal toelaat nie.

Hy loop stadig na haar toe, en met elke tree verdwyn die mure en jare en afstand tussen hulle. Toe hy so naby is dat hy die reuk van haar sjampoe kan ruik, gaan staan hy en kyk na haar, staar tot diep binne-in haar.

“Alex ... is dit regtig jy?” Haar woorde is net 'n fluistering. Sy haal haar sonbril af en trane laat haar oë blink.

Hulle het mekaar nou die dag omhels, maar hulle het sedert die dag voor 11 September nog nie weer hande vasgehou nie. Soms wanneer Alex in sy polisiemotor ry en die strate van Los Angeles patrolleer, onthou hy die sensasie van haar hande in syne so helder dat dit sy asem wegslaan. Hy weet steeds nie of sy 'n kêrel of selfs 'n verloofde het nie, maar niemand kan aan dit wat hulle al die jare gedeel het, raak nie. Noudat woorde nie sy gevoelens kan beskryf nie, doen hy die enigste ding wat hy weet hoe om te doen.

Hy hou sy hande uit na haar.

Holly maak 'n sagte geluid wat meer na huil as lag klink, maar sy moet verstaan hoe hy voel, want sy tree nader aan hom en vleg haar vingers stadig en saggies deur syne. Die gevoel is wonderlik en dit maak alles wat hy vir haar voel net sterker, so sterk dat dit hom laat skrik. Hy wil nie vra nie, maar hy kan nie langer wag nie. Hy voel hoe hy swig soos nooit tevore nie. “Is ... is daar iemand in jou lewe, Holly?”

Sy kyk diep in sy oë. “Nee.” Sy lyk versigtig, asof sy nie kan glo wat besig is om te gebeur nie. “En in jou lewe?”

“Niemand. Nooit.”

Sy vleg haar vingers effens dieper tussen syne in. “Ook nie in myne nie.”

Hy kan die soet geur van haar vel ruik. En al wat hy wil doen, is om haar te omhels en te soen sodat sy vir seker kan weet hoe hy oor haar voel. Maar eers moet hy probeer om homself aan haar te verduidelik. “Ek ... ek het iemand anders geword toe my pa in daardie gebou dood is.”

“Ek weet.” Haar stem klink hartseer en sy glimlag. Daar is nuwe trane in haar oë. “Ek het dit sien gebeur, onthou?”

Hy maak een van sy hande uit hare los en druk 'n stukkie van haar blonde

hare agter haar oor in. “Ek is jammer, Holly. Dit wat gebeur het, het my blind gemaak.” Hy sit sy hand op sy bors. “Maar jy was nog altyd hierbinne.” Hy vou sy hand om die kant van haar gesig. “Jy was nog altyd in my hart.”

“Reg langs jou.” Met haar los hand vat sy saggies aan sy gesig. “Want jy, die Alex wat ek geken het, was ook nog altyd in jou hart. Maak nie saak hoe hard jy probeer het om iemand te word wat nie omgee nie.” Sy draai haar kop skuins, haar oë vol liefde. “Ek het nooit opgehou om jou lief te hê nie, Alex. Ek het altyd geglo dat ek jou eendag weer sal vind.”

“Holly ...” Bittersoet vreugde spoel deur sy are en pomp deur sy hart, laat gevoelens in hom los wat hy tot nou toe nie geken het nie. Maar hy raak nog nie té opgewonde nie. “Dit kon nie vir jou so maklik gewees het om van my te vergeet en aan te beweeg nie. Ek is jammer.” Hy trek sy vingers deur haar sagte hare agter in haar nek. “Sal jy my ooit kan vergewe?”

Net die twee van hulle bestaan. Nie die vliegtuie bo hulle of die verkeer in die besige strate rondom die hoofkantoor nie. Nie die stoele of die roudiens of enigets nie. Holly se hartseer glimlag laat hom tuis voel. “Nee, Alex.”

“Nee?” Sy hart klop wild en haar nabyheid laat hom vinniger as voorheen asemhaal.

Haar glimlag verdwyn, maar haar oë het hom liewer as ooit. “Nee, dit sal nooit so maklik wees om jou te vergeet nie.” Sy knip teen die trane in haar oë. “En, ja, ek vergewe jou.”

Dit gaan gebeur. Hy gaan haar soen soos in die een of ander veraf droom. Alex bestudeer haar oë, haar gesig. Sy lyf bewe as gevolg van die intense liefde wat hy op hierdie oomblik voel. “Ek het nog nooit iemand liefgehad behalwe jy nie. Ek het probeer, maar ’n deel van my wou net nie saamwerk nie.” Dan, omdat hy nie sy brein kan dwing om te dink of nog ’n woord uit te kry wat sin maak totdat hy doen wat hy graag wil doen nie, raak hy met sy lippe aan hare, en soos in ’n langverlore dans verenig hulle, verlore in die oomblik, verlore in mekaar.

Hulle soen mekaar lank, maar dit is nie ’n soen vol passie of fisieke begeerte nie – hoewel daardie gevoel nie ver weg is nie. Dit is eerder ’n soen wat die jare en twyfel uitvee en spreek van ’n liefde wat nie een van hulle vergeet het nie. Hy proe haar trane hoe langer hy haar soen, en toe die soen verby is, is sy wange ook nat.

Sy vryf die trane saggies met haar duim weg. “Ek is jammer oor Bo.”

Alex trek sy asem vinnig in. Hy lig sy ken en kyk na die blou lug bo hulle. “Hy was ’n goeie kollega.”

“Ek wens ek het hom langer geken.” Sy snuif en omhels hom, wieg effens terwyl hulle vir ’n oomblik aan die hond dink.

Weer wens Alex hy het meer konkrete dinge gehad om Bo te onthou, iets wat hy met Holly kan deel. Dan onthou hy Jamie se geskenk. Sy het vir hom ’n pakkie gegee en iets gesê van dat sy nie seker is Alex het so iets nie. “Wag,” hy maak homself los uit haar omhelsing en hou haar hand vas. “Kom saam met my. Ek moet Jamie se pakkie oopmaak.”

Holly loop saam met hom, haar vingers steeds deur syne gevleg. Dit is 'n gevoel wat Alex nooit weer wil verloor nie. Hulle kom by die eerste ry, en Alex los haar hand vir 'n oomblik sodat hy die geskenk kan oopmaak. Holly bly langs hom staan, sy kyk en wag.

Hy maak die wit boksie oop en binne-in, onder 'n paar stukkies sneespapier, is 'n geraamde collage wat Alex na sy asem laat snak. Die foto's in die raam is 'n paar pragtige skote van hom en Bo op Jamie-hulle se voorstoep, en een ongelooflike foto van Bo alleen. Vorstelik en lojaal, sy oë presies soos Alex dit altyd sal onthou. Dit voel skielik soos gister, Jamie se ongemaklike fotonemery sodat sy 'n manier kan kry om met hom oor sy verlede te praat. Hy is sedert daardie dag dankbaar vir die risiko wat sy geneem het, dat sy die afdruk van die bladsy uit Jake se joernaal vir hom gegee het en hom gehelp het om sy pad terug te vind na die Here.

Maar hy het tot nou toe van die foto's vergeet.

"Hy lyk so sterk, so mooi." Holly raak aan die fotoraam. "Die foto's is ongelooflik."

"Ek ... ek het nie gedink daar is foto's soos hierdie nie." Alex vou weer die fotoraam in die sneespapier toe. Hy sal later vir Jamie dankie sê, vir Jamie en vir Clay, en vir Joe en sy vrou – want hulle almal het gebid dat hy sy weg terugvind. Hy weet dit uit gesprekke wat hy die afgelope paar dae met Clay gehad het.

Toe hy die boksie toemaak, raak sy vingers aan hare, en daar gaan 'n rilling deur sy lyf. Hy vou sy hande om haar gesig en soen haar weer. "Ek kan nie glo dit is besig om te gebeur nie."

"Net God kan dit laat gebeur." Sy soen hom weer, stadiger as vroeër. Dan tel hulle Jamie se geskenk en die geraamde foto van die esel af op en loop na binne.

Terwyl hulle loop, verwonder Alex hom aan God se goedheid wat vir hom die wonderlikste ouers gegee het, en 'n hond wat hy vir altyd sal onthou. God wat hom gehelp het om te verstaan dat dit wat in sy hart aangaan baie belangriker is as dit wat in die wêreld aangaan. God wat hom gespaar het van 'n gewisse dood tussen hemelhoë vlamme. Maar bo alles verwonder hy hom daaraan dat God vir hom en Holly 'n tweede kans gee.

THIRTY-TWO

Linda held her son's elbow as he led her down the center aisle of the stunning little chapel on the hill at Pepperdine University, the one that overlooked the beach where Alex and Bo used to go on their rare days off. A hundred or so deputies and their families, and a handful of Holly's friends filled the pews. The air smelled of salt and sunshine and seawater.

They reached the front right pew and Alex kissed her cheek. "I love you, Mom."

"Love you too, Son." She held on a few seconds longer, still amazed at the transformation in him. "I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks." Alex leaned past her to his stepfather, Lee, who was already seated. Alex shook his hand. "Good to see you, sir."

"Yes," the two shared a sincere smile. Lee's voice filled with pride. "It's all so very good."

Alex patted his mother's hand and then left them and went to stand at the front of the church next to the pastor. Linda sat down and tried to catch her breath. If it was all just a dream, she wanted to wake up now before they went any further. But that was the most amazing part of the story. It was real. She sat back against the hard wooden bench and remembered again how she'd found out the news. It had been Veteran's Day — November 11 — just before dinner. The buzzer sounded, and Lee pushed the button to open the apartment building door. But when Linda asked who it was, Lee only smiled and said, "Delivery."

Five minutes later, Lee opened the front door and Alex walked in holding the hand of Holly Brooks. Linda still had to allow a quiet laugh when she thought of the way she must've looked. "Alex," her mouth stayed open and she turned to Holly. "What ... how could ...?"

Lee came to her and steadied her until she was able to form a complete sentence. In the meantime, Alex explained that after the fire and losing Bo, he and Holly had found common ground again. "The two of us and God too." He

came to her and hugged her. “I’ve missed so much, but no more, Mom. Not after this.”

After a month of seeing each other every day, Alex had done what Linda had always hoped he would do. He had asked Holly’s mother for permission and then purchased an engagement ring for her. They had a lot of years to make up for, and they wanted counseling from the pastor who would marry them, so the wedding was set for Saturday, March 7.

“We wanted to tell you in person.” Alex moved back, and Holly took his place, with hugs of her own.

Linda laughed and cried and told Alex and Holly and Lee over and over again that she had prayed for this and believed for this all along. Alex and Holly stayed for dinner, and the truth came out — Lee had known about the surprise for a week. The next morning they all took a trip to Ground Zero and St. Paul’s Chapel, and Alex talked about how he had connected with Jamie Bryan, and how she had worked in the church for three years after 9/11 and showed him the journal entry about his father.

Before Alex and Holly left for Los Angeles again, Linda and Lee prayed with them, asking God to protect them and thanking Him for this new chance at love. Now Linda smiled at her handsome son as the music began to change. That November weekend was one she’d remember forever.

But it wouldn’t come close to the one that was about to play out.

Alex still couldn’t believe Holly had said yes. After how he’d treated her, she could easily have told him no or asked for more time. But she stuck with what she’d told him that tender day of Bo’s memorial service. She had always believed that the Alex she had fallen in love with as a teenage girl was still in his heart somewhere.

He clasped his hands behind him and watched the door at the back of the church. So much had changed in the last four months. He was moving ahead in his SWAT training, but he wasn’t working overtime anymore. His time at headquarters was rich and fulfilling, the way it always would be. But it was a job. His faith, his love for Holly, his friends — those were his life now. Six times already, he and Holly had met up with Clay and Jamie and the others for dinner at the Michaels’ house.

Life was good at Clay and Jamie’s house. Sierra’s cat Wrinkles wasn’t sick like before, and the kids were well — so their times together had been happy and full of laughter. Alex smiled to himself. Laughter, of all things, something he wouldn’t have believed would ever be part of his life again. During their counseling sessions with the pastor, he and Holly had even talked about

having kids of their own.

They'd also taken a day and gone down to the beach where Alex had scattered Bo's ashes in the foam of a particularly powerful wave, the kind of wave Bo would've barked at had he been there.

Through Christmas and the New Year, Alex grew so close to Holly he couldn't understand how he'd lived seven years without her. They had both agreed to wait until they were married to begin the physical relationship they were both aching to experience. Some days Alex wondered why they'd scheduled the wedding so far out, but other times he enjoyed the wait, enjoyed watching Holly register for wedding gifts and get excited about going with her mom to pick out a dress.

Alex looked out over the faces in the church, the deputies and sergeants he'd worked with and grieved with, the family that made up the sheriff's department. But more than that, his eyes found those of Jamie, Joe and Wanda, and Eric and Laura Michaels. These were friends he'd have for life, he was sure. Holly already loved them, and right now he felt a little like his father had told Jake Bryan he felt. Life was good, love was sweet, and time felt like it would last forever.

He understood John 16:33 better now, the verse his father had wanted him to take hold of. Yes, in this world there would be trouble. But God had overcome the world. Otherwise, Alex never would've been standing here. Alex looked at Clay standing beside him — his best man. The two shared a smile, and for a few seconds Alex imagined what it would be like if his father were standing beside him now. A fleeting, familiar pain seared the surface of his heart, but it came with no rage, no sense of driven determination. Sure, he still thought about 9/11, the way he always would. But at this point, the crippling sorrow was far less all-consuming and only hit him as often as it did other victims of the terrorist attacks.

Every now and then.

Again the music changed, and this time the organist began to play the "Wedding March." Across both sides of the pews, people rose and faced the back of the church. The doors opened and Holly appeared, a vision of white lace and tanned arms, so stunning that an appreciative hush fell over their friends and family. Alex's heartbeat quickened and he stood straighter, not believing she was really about to be his. This was what he'd waited all his life for, even in the years when he had lied to himself. Holly Brooks, walking up the aisle, about to be his wife. *My dear God ... I can't believe You've brought us here ... thank You ... I'll never have enough days to thank you.*

He remembered to breathe as she came closer. Holly had never looked more

beautiful, but not so much because of her pretty dress. That wasn't what captured Alex's attention. Her veil was thin enough that Alex could see the only thing that mattered in this moment.

Holly's eyes, and an undying love that would stand the test of time.



Holly couldn't take her eyes off him. Of all the miracles God had worked on their behalf, this was the most unbelievable. The change in Alex. Because looking at him now, it was impossible to think of him the way he'd been only five months ago — hard and cold, closed off to love or life or any feelings other than the quest for revenge. She smiled as she came closer.

Alex standing at the front of the church waiting for her was everything she had always wanted — and he was everything she had known he could be. A man full of faith and a love that shone through in their beach walks and late-night talks, a love that was as transparent as the spring breeze outside their wedding chapel.

She had never dreamed she'd feel this happy again, but here she was — about to marry Alex Brady. They had written brief vows for this moment, a reflection of the pure richness of their love. The way they felt about each other wouldn't take a lot of words. They loved each other more than life, and they trusted God to take them through whatever the years held.

That was all.

As she reached him, as their hands touched and her body felt the now familiar desire, she could only think of one thing. Her mother was wrong. It wasn't only in the movies that love came at people all at once. Because what she and Alex shared really was a stunning rainbow across an otherwise dreary sky. When they'd found each other again, their intense feelings of a love that had never died hadn't taken time or work or any sort of effort.

They came all at once, in a rush, because they simply were, the way they would always be.



Jamie watched the wedding through teary eyes.

Clay was completely healed now, and he looked rugged and full of joy as he stood beside Alex during the ceremony. She thanked God every day that he

hadn't been killed, but she had to hold on lightly. The way any living person had to hold on if they understood the fleeting nature of life. She and Clay had spent more time together than ever before, and she couldn't possibly love him more. In the past months he'd become a mentor to Alex, helping him understand what it meant to really love a woman the way Christ intended her to be loved.

On a couple occasions, he had even drawn from excerpts in Jake's journal and favorite Bible verses to talk about love languages, and the danger of going to bed angry with each other. Clay had confided in Jamie last night that he was happy with how their talks had gone.

"Alex is going to be an amazing husband. The transformation in him is something only God could've done."

"Yes." Jamie looped her arms around his neck. "Because Alex finally understood that any move toward being a 'good guy' had to start with a hard look in the mirror."

Clay looked at her now and their eyes held. His lips curved into a subtle smile before he turned his attention back to the vows. Jamie dabbed at her eyes and listened to the words being said.

"Holly, I've loved you since the first time I saw you, and I'll love you until the last time." Alex smiled at his bride, his eyes damp. "I promise to respect and love you, to honor and cherish you." Alex was holding Holly's hands, lost in her eyes. They might as well have been the only two people in the room. He was finishing up, and the last part was the most poignant. "There will be hard times, as there have been before. But when they come, I promise never to put walls between me and you, and I will share with you whatever pain comes my way, because you are a part of me, Holly. As long as we both shall live."

Holly sounded choked up when it came to her turn. Her vows were the same as his until the very end. "Alex, I've watched what hurt and loss can do to you, and I promise you one more thing here, before our family and friends. I promise that when life hurts so much you're tempted to forget who you are, you can always come to me. I will be your mirror, Alex ... for the real you will always live here, inside my heart."

They were about to exchange rings when Jamie felt a tap on her shoulder.

"Mom," Sierra leaned in close to her. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I'm happy." Jamie sniffed. "Love makes me feel this way."

She wrinkled up her nose. "I'm glad I'm not in love." She stifled a giggle and then leaned her head on Jamie's shoulder.

CJ was on her other side, but he was too sleepy to notice much about the wedding. Jamie was glad for the chance to really focus on what was being said, because somehow the wedding between Alex and Holly was symbolic. It was a sign that beauty could rise from brokenness as many times as God was allowed to work in their lives. But beyond that, seeing this couple get married brought Jamie that final bit of closure where Jake was concerned.

She had devoted three years to helping victims of September 11, and when she moved here she thought that job was done. But with Alex and Holly, God had given her one more chance to help. Her prayers, the words from Jake's journal, Clay's talks with Alex — God had used all of it to bring about a dramatic healing in Alex's heart. Jamie smiled, and as she did, she was almost certain of something else.

Somewhere in heaven, Jake was smiling too.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Friends,

Writing about Alex Brady was an emotional journey for me. In him I saw so many of you who write and tell me about broken relationships or lost loves, strained friendships and hurt feelings between siblings. I can relate, of course, the way anyone breathing can relate.

Sometimes — as with Holly — we can clearly see what happened to turn the person we love away from us. But other times, we aren't so sure. There have been very good friends in our lives who have turned away, and we may never know the reason they have chosen to no longer love.

But the message of Alex's life is one we can all draw hope from. Broken relationships can be healed. More than that, it is simply impossible to think we can solve the pain and evil in the world, or even the pain in someone's life. When I outlined this book, I planned to show how Alex would eventually reach the end of himself in his quest to rid Los Angeles of crime. But then God showed me something I didn't expect.

One weekend in the middle of writing this book, through a sermon from the book of John by our wonderful Pastor Matt, I realized there was an even deeper truth in Alex's misguided determination. The fact that God never intended for us to eliminate the evil around us. But rather, through Christ's strength, to take a hard look at the evil within us. Wow. That message hit hard and became a driving force for the theme behind this story.

I really liked Alex, the way that he wanted so desperately to do good. We're a lot like him at times, but we all need to remember the Scripture Clay shared with Alex. *There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads only to death.* It's so important as we choose our way each day that we look to Jesus for wisdom and direction. When we're driven by emotions — healthy or hurtful — we can easily get distracted from the true work God has for us.

And what about Holly? Her love for Alex was a lot like Christ's love for us — no matter where we are now or how far we've moved from a faith in God, Christ loves us. He knows who we are on the inside — the person He made us

to be. Even if we've allowed time and tragedy to make us into someone different.

No one and nothing can separate us from the love of God — isn't that amazing? It's the same way Holly felt about Alex, and it will leave me with an example I'll think back on years from now.

I'm sad to see this story end, really. Alex was a special character for me, and so was Holly. In addition, I've loved writing about Jamie Bryan Michaels and remembering once more the incredible guy Jake Bryan was. I enjoyed spending time again with Clay, reminding myself of his godly qualities and his great love for Jamie and Sierra and CJ. It was nice to spend more time with Joe and Wanda, and to check in with Eric and Laura since *Beyond Tuesday Morning* four years ago.

Always, as I finish a book, I spend many hours praying for you — my reader friends. Sometimes God needs to take us to the middle of a towering inferno before we let go of our own ways and grab onto Him for life. But for most of us, we'll never wind up trapped on a hillside in the middle of a firestorm. Most of us will hear the voice of God calling us back or drawing us closer some other way. Through a conversation with a friend or a sermon on the radio.

Maybe even through Life-Changing Fiction™.

If during the course of reading this book you, like Alex Brady, found yourself crying out for God to forgive you, for Him to find you again, for the chance to become the person deep inside your heart that once upon a yesterday you used to be ... then I pray that you will connect with a Bible-believing church in your area. There, you should be able to find a Bible — if you don't already have one. That life-saving relationship with Christ is always rooted in His truth, the Scriptures.

If you are unable to purchase a Bible or find one at your local church, and if this is the first time you are walking into that relationship with Jesus, then write to me at my website — www.KarenKingsbury.com. Write the words "New Life" in the subject line, and I will send you a Bible. Because between the covers of that precious book are all the secrets to a new life.

For the rest of you, I'd love to hear your thoughts on *Remember Tuesday Morning*, how Alex's story spoke to you, and how it maybe even changed you. Contact me at my website, and while you're there, take a moment to look at the ways you can get involved with the community of other Karen Kingsbury readers. You can leave a prayer request or pray for someone else, tell me about an active military hero or a fallen one, and send me a picture so that all the world can pray for your soldier. You can also join my club and

chat with other readers about your favorite characters and books.

If this is your first time with me, thank you for taking the time to read. My website lists my other titles in their order, as well as by topic — in case you're looking for a specific type of Life-Changing Fiction™.

Again, thank you for your prayers for me and my family. We are doing well and trying to keep up with our kids — all of whom are growing way too fast. We feel your prayers on a daily basis, and please know that we pray for you too.

Until next time,

In His light and love,

Karen Kingsbury

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Please share these with your book clubs, church groups, friends, and family. Discussion makes the experience of reading so much richer!

1. How would you explain the change in Alex after the terrorist attacks on September 11?
2. Have you ever experienced a tragedy that made you doubt God or feel angry toward God? Explain.
3. Alex's father wanted him to have a firm understanding of John 16:33 — *In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.* What do you think Alex's father wanted him to get from that verse? What might have been his father's concerns for Alex?
4. How has that Scripture applied in your life? Tell about a time when you might've relied on that truth to get you through a certain situation.
5. Explain why Holly was still in LA years after she'd been turned away by Alex. What signs made it clear she hadn't forgotten him?
6. Was there a time in your life when you were stuck in a certain phase, unable to move forward? Tell about that time and why it left you feeling stuck.
7. What did you learn about ecoterrorists in *Remember Tuesday Morning*? Share your thoughts on this new criminal phenomenon.
8. Dave Jacobs was a developer, but he was also a bird-watcher and a generous friend to the homeless population in Los Angeles. What did the members of the REA probably think about Dave Jacobs? Why is it important not to view builders, environmentalists, or anyone else only as stereotypes?
9. Jamie wanted desperately to fix the problems in Alex's heart. What did she finally have to do in order to see that happen?
10. Are there people in your life who you'd love to step in and help? Is God giving you direction on how you can do that? What do you feel He wants you

to do? Share the situation, if possible.

11. What did Clay mean when he explained the difference between the evil outside a person, and the evil within?

12. Read John, chapter 16, and discuss what the Bible says about the evil within and without. What is Christ's plan for his people in regards to this issue?

13. Police dogs exhibit a very great loyalty and sense of courage and protection. Do you know anyone who has worked with a police dog? Tell about their experience.

14. In what ways is our relationship with Jesus like that of Alex's relationship with Bo?

15. A lot of people were praying for Alex as he traveled this difficult and challenging time in his life. What people's prayers stood out as making a difference?

16. Who are you praying for right now? What can you focus on so that you'll be encouraged to continue to pray? Tell about a time when a prayer in your life was answered after someone spent time praying for you.

17. The tragedy of September 11 is more of a distant memory for many Americans. Kids in high school today were in grade school when the terrorist attacks happened. What must we, as a nation, do to never forget the losses experienced that day?

18. The loss of his father will always be difficult for Alex. But as he marries Holly he realizes he will no longer be weighed down by that grief on an hourly basis. Instead he decides to allow himself to feel the pain only every now and then. What situation in your life are you better off visiting only every now and then?

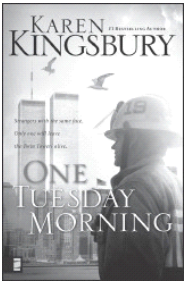
19. Holly's mother told her that real love takes work, that it didn't come at a person all at once like a blazing rainbow across an otherwise dreary sky. How do you feel about love?

20. Many different types of love were illustrated in this book. Talk about a few of them and explain what types of love are illustrated in your life.

9/11 SERIES

One Tuesday Morning

Karen Kingsbury



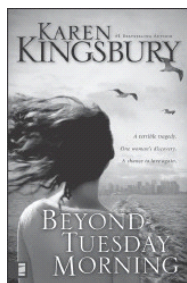
The last thing Jake Bryan knew was the roar of the World Trade Center collapsing on top of him and his fellow firefighters. The man in the hospital bed remembers nothing. Not rushing with his teammates up the stairway of the South Tower to help trapped victims. Not being blasted from the building. And not the woman sitting by his bedside who says she is his wife.

Jamie Bryan will do anything to help her beloved husband regain his memory. But that means helping Jake rediscover the one thing Jamie has never shared with him: his deep faith in God.

Beyond Tuesday Morning

Karen Kingsbury

**Winner of the Silver
Medallion book Award**



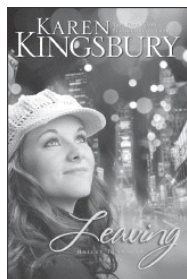
Determined to find meaning in her grief three years after the terrorist attacks on New York City, FDNY widow Jamie Bryan pours her life into volunteer work at a small memorial chapel across from where the Twin Towers once stood. There, unsure and feeling somehow guilty, Jamie opens herself to the possibility of love again.

But in the face of a staggering revelation, only the persistence of a tenacious man, the questions from Jamie's curious young daughter, and the words from her dead husband's journal can move Jamie beyond one Tuesday morning ... toward life.

BAILEY FLANIGAN SERIES

Leaving

Karen Kingsbury,
New York Times *Bestselling Author*



The Bailey Flanigan Series begins with Bailey leaving Bloomington for the adventure of a lifetime. She has won an audition for the ensemble of a Broadway musical in New York City. She's determined to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but is she really ready to leave family and friends for the loneliness of the city? And what of Cody? His disappearance has her worried about their future and praying that their love can survive.

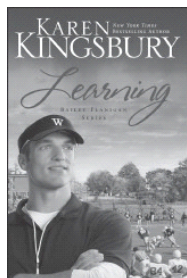
In order to be closer to his mother in jail, Cody takes a coaching job in a small community outside Indianapolis. New friends, distance, and circumstances expose cracks in his relationship with Bailey Flanigan.

Love, loneliness, big opportunities, and even bigger decisions highlight the first book in the new Bailey Flanigan Series that features members of the popular Baxter family and finally completes the Bailey Flanigan/Cody Coleman story.

BAILEY FLANIGAN SERIES

Learning

Karen Kingsbury,
New York Times *Bestselling Author*



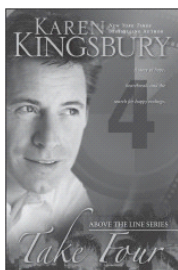
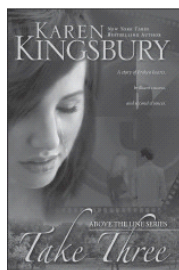
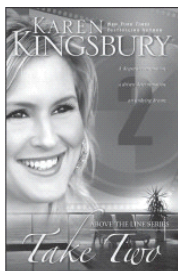
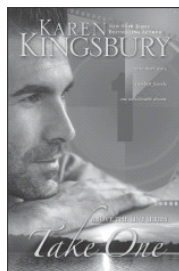
Learning, book two in the Bailey Flanigan Series, picks up where Leaving ended. Bailey Flanigan and Cody Coleman are not only separated by physical distance, they are also faced with great emotional distance. While Bailey grows closer to her dream to be an actress and dancer in New York, Cody coaches a small high school football team ... on and off the field. But neither feels complete without the chance to share their dreams with one other.

Can distance truly make the heart grow fonder? Or will Cody learn to turn to others to share in his happiness? And in the face of tragedy, who will be there to provide comfort?

As Cody's past catches up with him, he must learn to reach out for help or risk withdrawing permanently inside himself. Both Bailey and Cody find themselves learning significant life lessons in this poignant love story, featuring members from Karen Kingsbury's popular Baxter family.

ABOVE THE LINE SERIES

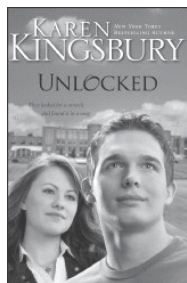
The four novels of the bestselling Above the Line Series follow dedicated Hollywood producers, as they seek to transform the culture through their film. The books also feature characters from the much-loved Baxter Family. Follow Chase Ryan and Keith Ellison as they journey through the world of moviemaking and learn all that glitters is not gold, and that success could cost them everything — their relationships and their ideals. Each book in the series focuses on a different part of the process and the various struggles they face to reach their goals of making a movie that changes lives.



Unlocked

A Love Story

Karen Kingsbury,
New York Times *Bestselling Author*



Before You Take a Stand ... You've Got to Take a Chance.

Holden Harris is an eighteen-year-old locked in a prison of autism. Despite his quiet ways and quirky behaviors, Holden is very happy and socially normal — on the inside, in a private world all his own. In reality, he is bullied at school by kids who only see that he is very different.

Ella Reynolds is part of the “in” crowd. A cheerleader and star of the high

school drama production, her life seems perfect. When she catches Holden listening to her rehearse for the school play, she is drawn to him ... the way he is drawn to the music. Then, Ella makes a dramatic discovery — she and Holden were best friends as children.

Frustrated by the way Holden is bullied, and horrified at the indifference of her peers, Ella decides to take a stand against the most privileged and popular kids at school. Including her boyfriend, Jake.

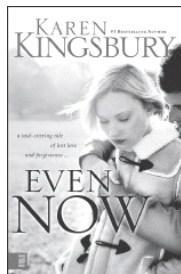
Ella believes miracles can happen in the unlikely places, and that just maybe an entire community might celebrate from the sidelines. But will Holden's praying mother and the efforts of Ella and a cast of theater kids be enough to unlock the prison that contains Holden?

This time, friendship, faith, and the power of a song must be strong enough to open the doors to the miracle Holden needs.

LOST LOVE SERIES

Even Now

Karen Kingsbury



Sometimes hope for the future is found in the ashes of yesterday.

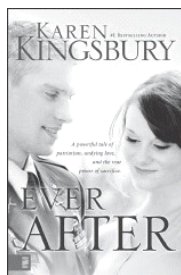
A young woman seeking answers to her heart's deepest questions. A man and woman driven apart by lies and years of separation ... who have never forgotten each other.

With hallmark tenderness and power, Karen Kingsbury weaves a tapestry of lives, losses, love, and faith — and the miracle of resurrection.

Ever After

Karen Kingsbury

2007 Christian book of the Year



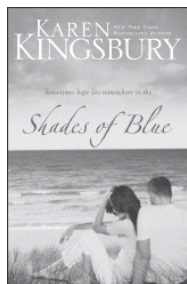
Two couples torn apart — one by war between countries, and one by a war within.

In this moving sequel to *Even Now*, Emily Anderson, now twenty, meets the man who changes everything for her: Army reservist Justin Baker. Their tender relationship, founded on a mutual faith in God and nurtured by their trust and love for each other, proves to be a shining inspiration to everyone they know, especially Emily's reunited birth parents.

But Lauren and Shane still struggle to move past their opposing beliefs about war, politics, and faith. When tragedy strikes, can they set aside their opposing views so that love — God's love — might win, no matter how great the odds?

Shades of Blue

Karen Kingsbury,
New York Times *Bestselling Author*



In between a checkered past and a fairytale future, a decision awaits.

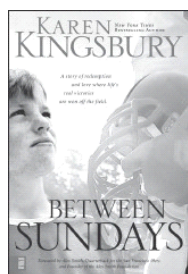
Brad Cutler, twenty-eight, is a rising star at his New York ad agency, about to marry the girl of his dreams. Anyone would agree he has it all — a great career, a beautiful and loving fiancée, and a fairy tale life ahead of him ... when memories of a high school girlfriend begin to torment him. Lost innocence and one very difficult choice flood his conscience, and he is no longer sure what the future will bring except for this: He must go back to the shores of Holden Beach in search of his first love, and a forgiveness neither of them has ever known.

Three people must work through the repercussions of a decision made long ago before any of them can look toward a new future.

Between Sundays

Karen Kingsbury,

New York Times Bestselling Author



Aaron Hill has it all — athletic good looks and the many privileges of a star quarterback. His Sundays are spent playing NFL football in front of a televised audience of millions. But Aaron's about to receive an unexpected handoff, one that will give him a whole new view of his self-centered life.

Derrick Anderson is a family man who volunteers his time with foster kids while sustaining a long career as a pro football player. But now he's looking for a miracle. He must act as team mentor while still striving for the one thing that matters most this season — keeping a promise he made years ago.

Megan Gunn works two jobs and spends her spare time helping at the youth center. Much of what she does, she does for the one boy for whom she is everything — a foster child whose dying mother left him in Megan's care. Now she wants to adopt him, but one obstacle stands in the way. Her foster son, Cory, is convinced that 49ers quarterback Aaron Hill is his father.

Two men and the game they love. A woman with a heart for the lonely and lost, and a boy who believes the impossible. Thrown together in a season of self-discovery, they're about to learn lessons in character and grace, love and sacrifice.

Because in the end, life isn't defined by what takes place on the first day of the week, but how we live it between Sundays.

Hoofstuk 32

Linda hou haar seun se elmboog vas toe hy haar met die paadjie langs lei in die pragtige kapel op die heuwel by Pepperdine University, die een wat uitkyk oor die strand waarheen Alex en Bo gegaan het op die min dae wat hulle af gehad het. Ongeveer honderd polisiemanne en hulle gesinne en 'n handjievol van Holly se vriende sit in die kerkbanke. Die lug ruik soos sout, son en seewater.

Hulle loop tot by die bank regs voor en Alex soen haar op haar wang. "Ek is lief vir Ma."

"Ek is lief vir jou ook, my seun." Sy hou 'n paar oomblikke langer sy arm vas, steeds in verwondering oor die verandering wat in hom plaasgevind het. "Ek is so bly vir jou."

"Dankie." Alex leun verby haar na Lee, sy stiefpa, wat reeds sit. Alex skud sy hand. "Goed om Meneer te sien."

"Ja," die twee glimlag opreg vir mekaar. Lee se stem is trots. "Dit is 'n voorreg."

Alex vryf sy ma se hand en loop dan verder om voor in die kerk langs die leraar te staan. Linda gaan sit en voel uitasem. As dit net 'n droom is, wil sy nou wakker word, voordat hulle voortgaan. Maar dit is die ongelooflikste deel van die storie. Dit is die werklikheid. Sy leun terug teen die bank en onthou weer hoe sy die nuus gehoor het. Dit was 11 November, net voor aandete. Die klokkie het gelui en Lee het die knoppie gedruk om die woonstelblok se deur oop te maak. Toe Linda vra wie dit is, het Lee net geglimlag en gesê: "Aflowering!"

Vyf minute later het Lee die voordeur oopgemaak en Alex het ingeloop met Holly Brooks aan die hand. Linda lag stil terwyl sy dink aan hoe sy moes gelyk het. "Alex," haar mond het oopgehang en sy het na Holly gedraai. "Wat ... hoe kan ... ?"

Lee het na haar toe gekom en haar vasgehou totdat sy in staat was om 'n hele sin te sê. Intussen het Alex vir haar verduidelik dat ná die brand en Bo se dood, hy en Holly mekaar weer gevind het. "Ek en Holly, en ook God." Hy het nadergekom en haar omhels. "Ek het soveel gemis, Ma, maar nie meer nie. Nie ná alles nie."

Ná 'n maand wat hulle mekaar elke dag gesien het, het Alex gedoen wat Linda altyd gehoop het hy sou. Hy het Holly se ma vir toestemming gevra en

toe vir haar 'n verloofring gekoop. Hulle het baie jare gehad om voor op te maak, en hulle wou vir berading gaan by die leraar wat hulle sou trou. Toe is die troue geskeduleer vir Saterdag 7 Maart.

“Ons wou self vir Ma kom vertel.” Alex het teruggestaan en Holly het in sy plek kom staan en ook drukkies uitgedeel.

Linda het gelag en gehuil en vir Alex en Holly en Lee oor en oor vertel dat sy hiervoor gebid het en die hele tyd geglo het dit gaan gebeur. Alex en Holly het vir ete gebly, en die waarheid het uitgekom – Lee het 'n week lank van die verrassing geweet.

Die volgende oggend het hulle almal na Ground Zero en St. Paul's Chapel gegaan, en Alex het vertel hoe hy vir Jamie ontmoet het en hoe sy ná 11 September vir drie jaar by die kerk gewerk het en vir hom die joernalinskrywing oor sy pa gewys het.

Voordat Alex en Holly weer terug is Los Angeles toe, het Linda en Lee saam met hulle gebid, gevra dat God hulle sal beskerm en vir Hom dankie gesê vir hierdie nuwe kans op liefde. Die musiek verander en nou glimlag Linda vir haar aantreklike seun. Daardie naweek in November is een wat sy vir altyd sal onthou.

Maar dit sal nie eers naastenby wees soos die een wat nou begin nie.

✧

Alex kan steeds nie glo Holly het ja gesê nie. Ná die manier hoe hy haar behandel het, kon sy maklik vir hom nee gesê het of vir meer tyd gevra het. Maar sy het gehou by wat sy daardie spesiale dag van die roudiens vir hom gesê het. Sy het altyd geglo dat die Alex op wie sy as tiener verlief geraak het steeds êrens in sy hart is.

Hy hou sy hande agter sy rug vas en kyk na die deur aan die agterkant van die kerk. So baie het in die afgelope vier maande verander. Hy vorder met sy SWAT-opleiding, maar hy werk nie meer oortyd nie. Sy tyd by hoofkantoor is besig en bevredigend, soos dit altyd sal wees. Maar dit is net sy werk. Sy geloof, sy liefde vir Holly, sy vriende – dit is nou sy lewe. Hy en Holly het nou al ses keer saam met Clay en Jamie en die ander aandete by die Michaelse se huis geniet.

Alles gaan goed by Clay en Jamie se huis. Sierra se kat Wrinkles is nie siek soos voorheen nie, en dit gaan goed met die kinders – hulle kuiertjies saam is daarom gelukkig en hulle lag baie. Alex glimlag. Lag van alle dinge, iets wat hy nooit kon glo weer deel van sy lewe sou wees nie. Tydens hulle beradingssessie met die leraar het hy en Holly selfs daarvoor gepraat om kinders van hul eie te hê.

Hulle het ook 'n dag afgestaan om strand toe te gaan en Alex het Bo se as in die skuim van 'n baie kragtige golf gestrooi, die tipe golf waarvoor Bo sou geblaf het as hy daar was.

Gedurende Kersfees en Nuwejaar het Alex só na aan Holly gegroei dat hy nie kan verstaan hoe hy sewe jaar lank sonder haar geleef het nie. Hulle het al twee ingestem om eers wanneer hulle getroud is met die fisieke verhouding te

begin wat hul albei so graag wil ervaar. Alex het soms gewonder hoekom hulle die troue vir so láát gereël het, maar ander kere het hy dit weer geniet om te wag, om te sien hoe Holly lysies vir trougeskenke saamstel en opgewonde raak om saam met haar ma die rok te gaan kies.

Alex kyk na die gesigte in die kerk, die polisiemanne en sersante saam met wie hy werk en gerou het, die familie wat die polisie verteenwoordig. Maar dan vind sy oë dié van Jamie, Joe en Wanda, en Eric en Laura Michaels. Dit is vriende wat hy vir die res van sy lewe sal koester, daarvan is hy seker. Holly hou reeds van hulle, en op die oomblik voel hy 'n bietjie soos sy pa vir Jake Bryan gesê het hy voel. Die lewe is goed, die liefde wonderlik, en dit lyk of tyd vir ewig sal aanhou.

Hy verstaan nou Johannes 16:33 beter, die teksvers wat sy pa wou hê hy moet sy eie maak. Ja, in hierdie wêreld sal daar swaarkry wees. Maar God het die wêreld reeds oorwin. Anders sou Alex nooit hier gestaan het nie. Alex kyk na Clay wat langs hom staan, sy strooijonker. Hulle glimlag vir mekaar en vir 'n paar oomblikke stel Alex hom voor hoe dit sou wees as sy pa nou langs hom gestaan het. 'n Bekende pyn dring sy hart vir 'n oomblik binne, maar hy word nie kwaad nie en ervaar nie 'n vasberadenheid nie. Natuurlik dink hy nog aan 11 September soos hy altyd sal. Maar nou is die hartseer wat hom lam gelaat het nie so oorweldigend nie en tref dit hom soos dit ander slagoffers van die terroriste-aanvalle tref. Elke nou en dan.

Weer verander die musiek en hierdie keer begin die orrelis die troumars speel. Aan albei kante van die paadjie staan die mense op en kyk na die agterkant van die kerk. Die deure gaan oop en Holly kom in, wit kant en bruingebrande arms, so mooi dat die vriende en familie na hul asem snak. Alex se hart klop vinniger en hy staan regopper, hy kan nie glo dat sy nou regtig syne gaan word nie. Dit is waarvoor hy sy hele lewe lank gewag het, selfs in die jare toe hy vir homself gejoj het. Holly Brooks loop met die paadjie af, op pad om sy vrou te word. *Liewe Here ... Ek kan nie glo U het ons tot hier gelei nie. Dankie ... Ek sal nooit vir U genoeg dankie kan sê nie.*

Hy onthou om asem te haal toe sy naderkom. Holly het nog nooit mooier gelyk nie, maar nie soseer oor haar mooi rok nie. Dit is nie wat Alex se aandag trek nie. Haar sluier is dun genoeg dat Alex die enigste ding kan sien wat op hierdie oomblik saak maak. Holly se oë, en 'n brandende liefde wat vir altyd sal hou.



Holly kan haar oë nie van hom afhou nie. Van al die wonderwerke wat God in haar lewe laat gebeur het, is hierdie die ongelooflikste. Die verandering in Alex. Want terwyl sy nou na hom kyk, is dit onmoontlik om aan hom te dink soos hy slegs vyf maande gelede was – hard en koud, teen die liefde en die lewe en enige gevoelens wat nie wraak ingesluit het nie. Sy glimlag toe sy naderkom.

Alex wat voor in die kerk staan en vir haar wag, is alles wat sy nog ooit wou hê. En hy is alles wat sy weet hy kan wees. Hy is 'n man van geloof en sy

liefde kan gesien word wanneer hulle op die strand gaan stap en in hul laataandpraatjies. Sy liefde is so deursigtig soos die lentebries buite die kerk. Sy sou nooit kon droom dat sy weer so gelukkig sou wees nie, maar hier is sy, op die punt om met Alex Brady te trou. Hulle het kort huweliksbeloftes vir hierdie oomblik geskryf, 'n weerspieëling van die reïne rykheid van hulle liefde. Hoe hulle oor mekaar voel, kan nie regtig in woorde uitgedruk word nie. Hulle het mekaar oneindig baie lief en hulle vertrou op God om hulle te lei deur alles wat vir hulle voorlê.

Kort en kragtig.

Toe sy by hom kom, toe hulle hande aan mekaar raak en haar lyf die bekende begeerte voel, kan sy net aan een ding dink. Haar ma was verkeerd. Dit is nie net in flieks waar mense dadelik liefde vind nie. Want wat sy en Alex deel, is werklik 'n asemrowende reënboog in 'n andersins mistroostige hemel. Toe hulle mekaar weer gevind het, het hulle intense liefde wat nooit gesterf het nie, nie enige tyd of werk geveer nie.

Dit het skielik gekom, baie vinnig, omdat dit reeds bestaan het soos dit nog altyd het.

✧

Jamie kyk na die troue deur tranerige oë.

Clay is nou heeltemal gesond, en hy lyk vol lewe en vreugde waar hy tydens die seremonie langs Alex staan. Sy sê elke dag vir God dankie dat hy nie dood is nie, maar sy moenie te styf aan hom vashou nie. Soos enige ander mens wat weet hoe kort die lewe is. Sy en Clay bring meer tyd saam deur as ooit tevore, en sy kan hom nie liever hê nie. In die afgelope maande het hy Alex se mentor geword, hom help verstaan wat dit beteken om 'n vrou werklik lief te hê soos Christus bedoel sy liefgehe moet word.

'n Paar keer het hy selfs van uittreksels uit Jake se joernaal en gunsteling teksverse gebruik gemaak om oor die tale van die liefde te praat, en hoe gevaarlik dit is om kwaad te gaan slaap. Clay het gisteraand vir Jamie vertel hoe bly hy is oor hoe hulle praatjies afgehoop het.

“Alex gaan 'n wonderlike man wees. Die transformasie wat in hom plaasgevind het, is iets wat net God kan doen.”

“Ja.” Jamie het haar arms om sy nek gegooi. “Want Alex verstaan uiteindelik dat om 'n ‘goeie ou’ te wees 'n mens eers goed na jouself in die spieël moet kyk.”

Clay kyk op die oomblik in haar rigting en hulle kyk lank na mekaar. Daar verskyn 'n subtiele glimlag op sy gesig voordat hy weer sy aandag op die huweliksbeloftes vestig. Jamie vee oor haar oë en luister na die woorde.

“Holly, ek is lief vir jou vandat ek jou die eerste keer gesien het, en ek sal jou tot aan die einde liefhê.” Alex glimlag vir sy bruid, sy oë is vol tranen. “Ek belowe om jou te respekteer en lief te hê, jou te eer en te koester.” Alex hou Holly se hand vas, verlore in haar oë. Dit is asof hulle die enigste twee persone in die kapel is. Hy is besig met die laaste deel wat die seerste kan maak. “Daar sal moeilike tye wees soos daar al voorheen was. Maar wanneer

dit oor ons pad kom, belowe ek om nooit mure tussen ons te bou nie. En ek sal enige pyn wat na my kant toe kom met jou deel, want jy is deel van my. Tot die dood ons skei.”

Holly klink hartseer toe dit haar beurt is. Haar huweliksbelofte is dieselfde as syne, net die laaste deel verskil. “Alex, ek het gesien wat seerkry en verlies aan jou kan doen, en ek belowe nog iets aan jou hier voor ons familie en vriende. Ek belowe dat wanneer die lewe jou so seermaak dat jy wil vergeet wie jy is, jy altyd na my toe kan kom. Ek sal jou spieël wees, Alex ... want die ware jy sal altyd hier in my hart bly.”

Hulle is op die punt om vir mekaar die ringe te gee toe Jamie iemand aan haar skouer voel raak.

“Mamma,” Sierra leun nader. “Hoekom huil Mamma?”

“Want ek is bly.” Jamie snuif. “Die liefde laat my so voel.”

Sy trek haar neus op ’n plooi. “Ek is bly ek is nie verlief nie.” Sy onderdruk ’n laggie en lê dan met haar kop op Jamie se skouer.

CJ sit aan haar ander kant, maar hy is te aan die slaap om te sien wat gebeur. Jamie is baie bly oor die geleentheid om regtig ag te slaan op dit wat gesê word, want op die een of ander manier is die huwelik tussen Alex en Holly simbolies. Dit is ’n teken dat iets moois uit hartseer kan spruit soveel keer as wat ’n mens God toelaat om in jou lewe te werk. Maar meer as dit, om hierdie paartjie te sien trou, bring vir Jamie daardie laaste bietjie genesing wat Jake betref.

Sy het drie jaar van haar lewe daaraan afgestaan om slagoffers van 11 September te help, en toe sy hierheen getrek het, het sy gedink haar werk is afgehandel. Maar met Alex en Holly het God vir haar nog een kans gegee om te help. Haar gebede, die woorde uit Jake se joernaal, Clay se gesprekke met Alex – God het dit alles gebruik om groot genesing in Alex se hart teweeg te bring. Jamie glimlag, en toe sy dit doen, is sy amper seker van nog iets.

Êrens in die hemel glimlag Jake ook.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One night when I was putting the finishing touches on this book, Austin crawled into bed next to me and stared at my laptop screen. “You know, Mom,” he said, “I’ve been meaning to ask you about writing books. I have a couple questions.” I smiled at him and asked him what he wanted to know. “Well,” he said, “you know those beautiful covers on your books? They’re so nice, with just the right colors and pictures. So, do you do those? Do you make the covers?”

I shook my head. “No, buddy. I don’t have anything to do with the covers, really. The publisher has these wonderful designers. They take care of coming up with a cover.”

He seemed a little disappointed for a few seconds. Then his eyes lit up. “I know, how about the design inside the book, the way the letters line up just so, and those little swirly things that make the first page of every chapter so nice?” He scrunched up his face, slightly baffled. “Do you do that part?”

Again I shook my head. “No, honey. Actually, there are designers at the publisher that make sure the book looks nice on the inside.” My smile turned a little sheepish. “They’re the ones who do that.”

His shoulders sank, and after a slight pause, his brow raised, hopeful once more. “I know, how about the bookstores! Are you the one who gets all those books to the bookstores, so they can be there on the shelves for the people?”

Feeling the clear sense that I was disappointing him, I shook my head and managed a weak smile. “No, Aus, I don’t do that either. The publisher has a sales staff who handles getting the books to the bookstores. After that, other people at the bookstores open the boxes of books and put them on the shelves. I don’t have anything to do with that.”

“Wow.” He climbed back down, but before he ran off he shrugged his shoulders. “You don’t really do that much, do you?”

Austin had a point. No book comes together without a great and talented team of people making it happen. For that reason, a special thanks to my friends at Zondervan Publishing who combined efforts to make *Remember Tuesday Morning* all it could be. A special thanks to my dedicated editor, Sue Brower, and to my brilliant publicist Karen Campbell, and to Karwyn Bursma, whose creative marketing is unrivaled in the publishing business.

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we talk about the highest possible goals, you see them as doable, reachable. You are a brilliant manager of my career, and I thank God for you. But even with all you do for my ministry of writing, I am doubly grateful for your prayers. The fact that you and Debbie are praying for me and my family keeps me confident every morning that God will continue to breathe into life the stories in my heart. Thank you for being so much more than a brilliant agent.

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Tricia, you are the best executive assistant I could ever hope to have. I treasure your loyalty and honesty, the way you include me in every decision and exciting website change. My site has been a different place since you stepped in, and the hits have grown tenfold. Along the way, the readers have so much more to help them in their faith, so much more than a story with this Life-Changing Fiction™. Please know that I pray for God's blessings on you always, for your dedication to helping me in this season of writing, and for your wonderful son, Andrew. And aren't we having such a good time too? God works all things to the good!

Sue, I believe you should've been a counselor! From your home far from mine, you get batches of reader letters every day, and you diligently answer them using God's wisdom and His Word. When readers get a response from "Karen's sister Susan," I hope they know how carefully you've prayed for them and for the responses you give. Thank you for truly loving what you do, Sue. You're gifted with people, and I'm blessed to have you aboard.

A special thanks also to Will Montgomery, my road manager. I was terrified to venture into the business of selling my books at events for a couple of reasons. First, I never wanted to profit from selling my books at speaking events, and second, because I would never have the time to handle such

details. Monty, you came in and helped me on both counts. With a mission statement that reads, “To love and serve the readers,” you have helped me supply books and free gifts to tens of thousands of readers at events across the country. More than that, you’ve become my friend, a very valuable part of the ministry of Life-Changing Fiction™. You are loyal and kind and fiercely protective of me, my family, and the work God has me doing. Thank you for everything you’re doing, and will continue to do.

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I also want to thank my friends with Extraordinary Women — Roy Morgan, Julie Clinton, Beth Cleveland, Charles Billingsley, and so many others. How wonderful to be a part of what God is doing through all of you. Thank you for making me part of your family.

Thanks also to my forever friends and family, the ones who rushed to our side this past year as we lost my dad. Your love has been a tangible source of comfort, pulling us through and making us know how very blessed we are to have you in our lives.

And the greatest thanks to God. The gift is Yours. I pray I might use it for years to come in a way that will bring You honor and glory.

Erkennings

Een aand toe ek besig was om die laaste veranderings aan die boek aan te bring, het Austin langs my in die bed gekruip en na my skootrekenaar se skerm gestaar. “Mamma, ek wou Ma al lankal uitvra oor die skryf van boeke. Ek het ’n paar vrae,” het hy gesê. Ek het vir hom geglimlag en gevra wat hy wil weet. “Wel,” het hy gesê, “Ma weet die mooi voorblaaie van Mamma se boeke? Hulle is regtig mooi met net die regte kleure en prentjies. Ontwerp Mamma die voorblaaie?”

Ek het my kop geskud. “Nee, my seun. Ek het niks met die voorblaaie te doen nie. Die uitgewer het wonderlike ontwerpers. Dit is hulle werk om met ’n voorblad vorendag te kom.”

Hy het vir ’n oomblik effens teleurgesteld gelyk. Toe het hy skielik weer opgewonde geword. “Wat van die ontwerp binne-in die boek, die manier hoe die letters op mekaar volg en daardie gekrulde lettertjies wat die eerste bladsy van elke hoofstuk so mooi laat lyk?” Hy het sy gesig op ’n plooi getrek, effens oorbluf. “Is dit Mamma se werk?”

Weer het ek my kop geskud. “Nee, my liefie. Daar is ontwerpers by die uitgewer wat seker maak die boeke lyk so mooi binne-in.” Ek het effens onnosel geglimlag. “Dit is hulle wat dit doen.”

Sy skouers het moedeloos gesak en na ’n rukkietjie het hy sy wenkbroue gelig, weereens vol hoop. “Ek weet! Wat van die boekwinkels? Is dit Mamma se werk om die boeke by die boekwinkels te kry sodat dit op die rakke kan kom vir die mense om te koop?”

Ek het besef dat ek hom grootliks teleurstel en het my kop geskud en flou geglimlag. “Nee, Aus, dis ook nie my werk nie. Die uitgewer het verkoopspersoneel wat die boeke by die boekwinkels kry. Daarna maak ander mense by die boekwinkels die bokse oop en pak die boeke op die rak. Dit is nie my werk nie.”

“Sjoe.” Hy het uit die bed geklim en net voordat hy uit die kamer gehardloop het, het hy sy skouers opgehaal en gesê: “So Mamma doen nie eintlik veel nie, of hoe?”

Austin het iets beet gehad. Geen boek kan die lig sien sonder ’n groot en talentvolle span mense wat dit laat gebeur nie. Daarom sê ek spesiaal dankie aan my vriende by Zondervan wat saamgewerk het om hierdie boek die beste moontlike roman te maak. ’n Spesiale woord van dank aan my toegewyde redakteur, Sue Brower, en aan my briljante uitgewer, Karen Campbell, en aan Karwyn Bursma wie se kreatiewe bemaking ongeëwenaar is in die uitgewersbedryf.

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eer en verheerliking sal bring.

About the Author

A wall went up around Alex Brady's heart when his father, a New York firefighter, died in the Twin Towers. Turning his back on the only woman he ever loved, Alex shut out all the people who cared about him to concentrate on fighting crime. He and his trusty K9 partner, Bo, are determined to eliminate evil in the world and prevent tragedies like 9/11.

Then the worst fire season in California's history erupts, and Alex faces the ultimate challenge to protect the community he serves. An environmental terrorist group is targeting the plush Oak Canyon Estates. At the risk of losing his job, and his soul, Alex is determined to infiltrate the group and put an end to their corruption. Only the friendship of Clay and Jamie Michaels — and the love of a dedicated young woman — can help Alex drop the walls around his heart and move forward into the future God has for him.

Karen Kingsbury is America's favorite inspirational novelist with over ten million books in print. Her Life-Changing Fiction™ has produced multiple bestsellers, including *Between Sundays*, *Even Now*, *One Tuesday Morning*, *Beyond Tuesday Morning*, and *Ever After*, which was named the 2007 Christian Book of the Year. An award-winning author and newly published songwriter, Karen currently has several movies optioned for production. Karen lives in Washington State with her husband, Don, and their six children, three of whom were adopted from Haiti.

Outeursbrief

Liewe vriende

Om oor Alex Brady te skryf, was vir my 'n emosionele reis. In hom het ek soveel van julle gesien wat skryf en vir my vertel van stukkende verhoudings of verlore liefde, verhoudings waarin spanning heers en rusies tussen broers en susters. Ek kan my natuurlik hiermee vereenselwig soos enigiemand op aarde.

Soms, soos in Holly se geval, kan ons duidelik sien wat gebeur het dat iemand van ons af wegdraai. Ander kere is ons onseker. Daar is goeie vriende wat hul rug op ons gedraai het, en ons sal dalk nooit weet hoekom hulle gekies het om

nie meer lief te hê nie.

Maar die boodskap van Alex se lewe kan vir ons almal hoop gee. Gebroke verhoudings kan genees word. Meer as dit, dit is eenvoudig onmoontlik om te dink dat ons die pyn en boosheid in die wêreld kan wegvat, of selfs die pyn in iemand se lewe. Toe ek die boek beplan het, het ek daaraan gedink om te wys hoe Alex uiteindelik magteloos staan ten opsigte van sy soeke om Los Angeles van misdaad te bevry. Maar toe het God vir my iets onverwags gewys.

Een naweek terwyl ek besig was om die boek te skryf, het 'n preek uit die boek Johannes deur ons wonderlike leraar Matt my laat besef dat daar selfs 'n dieper waarheid in Alex se onversetlik vasberadenheid is. Die feit dat God nooit bedoel het dat ons van die boosheid om ons ontslae hoef te raak nie, maar dat ons eerder met Christus se krag moet kyk na die boosheid in onself. Sjoel! Daardie boodskap het my hard getref en vorm gegee aan die tema van die storie.

Ek het regtig van Alex gehou, die manier hoe hy desperaat probeer het om goed te doen. Ons is soms baie soos hy, maar ons almal moet die teksvers onthou wat Clay met Alex gedeel het. "Dit lyk dalk vir iemand of hy die regte ding doen; agterna kom dit uit dat dit na die dood gelei het." Dit is so belangrik dat ons daagliks na Jesus draai vir wysheid en leiding. Wanneer ons deur ons emosies aangevuur word, gesond of ongesond, kan ons maklik afdwaal van dit wat God wil hê ons moet doen.

En wat van Holly? Haar liefde vir Alex was baie soos Christus se liefde vir ons – maak nie saak waar ons onself nou bevind of hoe ver ons weggedwaal het van ons geloof in God nie, Christus is lief vir ons. Hy weet wie ons aan die binnekant is: die persoon wat hy ons gemaak het om te wees. Selfs al het ons toegelaat dat tyd en hartseer van ons iemand anders maak.

Niks en niemand kan ons van God se liefde skei nie. Is dit nie ongelooflik nie? Dit is ook hoe Holly oor Alex gevoel het, en dit sal vir my 'n voorbeeld wees wat ek vir lank sal onthou.

Dit was vir my regtig hartseer om te sien hoe hierdie storie tot 'n einde loop. Alex was vir my 'n spesiale karakter, so ook Holly. Daarmee saam was dit ook vir my lekker om oor Jamie Bryan Michaels te skryf en weereens te onthou watter wonderlike man Jake Bryan was. Dit was vir my lekker om weer tyd saam met Clay deur te bring, en myself te herinner aan sy goddelike kwaliteite en sy sterk liefde vir Jamie, Sierra en CJ. Dit was lekker om meer tyd saam met Joe en Wanda deur te bring, en te sien wat sedert die vorige boek in Eric en Laura se lewe aangaan.

Wanneer ek besig is om 'n boek af te handel, bring ek baie ure deur deur vir julle, my lesersvriende, te bid. Soms moet God ons tot binne-in 'n vuurpoel neem voordat ons van ons eie weë afsien en Hom aangryp om te bly leef. Maar die meeste van ons sal nooit op 'n heuwel in die middel van 'n vuurstorm vasgevang word nie. Ons sal eerder hoor hoe God se stem ons terugroep en ons op 'n ander manier nadertrek. Deur 'n gesprek met 'n vriend

of 'n preek oor die radio.

Miskien selfs deur Life-Changing Fiction™.

As jy tydens die lees van die boek soos Alex uitgeroep het dat God jou moet vergewe, dat Hy jou weer sal vind, vir die kans om die persoon diep binne-in jou hart te word, die persoon wat jy eens op 'n tyd was ... dan bid ek dat jy by 'n kerk in jou omgewing sal aansluit wat werklik die Bybel as uitgangspunt gebruik. Daar behoort jy 'n Bybel te kan kry as jy nie reeds een het nie. Die verhouding met Christus wat jou lewe kan red, spruit altyd uit sy waarheid, die Bybel.

As jy nie in staat is om 'n Bybel te koop of een by jou plaaslike kerk te kry nie, en as dit die eerste keer is wat jy 'n verhouding met Jesus wil aanknoop, skryf vir my op my webtuiste, www.KarenKingsbury.com. Skryf die woorde “New Life” as onderwerp en ek sal vir jou 'n Bybel stuur. Want in daardie kosbare boek is al die geheime vir 'n nuwe lewe.

Ek sal dit baie waardeer om te hoor wat julle van hierdie boek dink, hoe Alex se storie met jou gepraat het, en hoe dit jou dalk selfs verander het. Skryf vir my op my webtuiste en terwyl jy dit besoek, staan 'n paar minute af om te kyk hoe jy betrokke kan raak in die gemeenskap van ander Karen Kingsbury-lesers. Jy kan ook 'n gebedsversoek rig of vir iemand anders bid, vir my vertel van 'n militêre held of selfs een wat gesneuwel het, en vir my 'n foto stuur sodat die hele wêreld vir jou soldaat kan bid. Jy kan ook by my klub aansluit en met ander lesers oor jou gunsteling karakters en boeke praat.

As dit die eerste keer is wat jy een van my boeke lees, baie dankie vir jou tyd. Op my webtuiste is 'n lys van my ander boeke in volgorde, asook gegroepeer volgens die onderwerp indien jy op soek is na 'n spesifieke tipe Life-Changing Fiction™.

Weereens baie dankie vir julle gebede vir my en my familie. Dit gaan goed met ons en ons probeer byhou met ons kinders wat almal heeltemal te vinnig grootword. Ons waardeer julle daaglikse gebede. Weet dat ons vir julle ook bid.

Mag God se lig en liefde by jou bly.

Tot volgende keer.

Karen Kingsbury

www.KarenKingsbury.com

Besprekingsvrae

Deel asseblief hierdie vrae met jou boekklub, kerkgroepe, vriende en familie. Besprekings dra soveel by tot die leesondervinding!

1. Hoe sal jy die verandering in Alex verduidelik ná die terroriste-aanvalle op 11 September?
2. Het jy al ooit 'n tragedie ervaar wat jou in God laat twyfel het of waarom jy vir Hom kwaad was? Verduidelik.

3. Alex se pa wou hê hy moes Johannes 16:33 sy eie maak: “Ek sê hierdie dinge vir julle sodat julle in My rus en vrede kan vind. In hierdie wêreld sal julle swaarkry beleef, maar skep moed: Ek het die wêreld reeds oorwin.” Hoe dink jy wou Alex se pa hê moet hy hierdie vers verstaan? Waaroer was Alex se pa waarskynlik bekommerd?
4. Hoe is hierdie teksvers op jou lewe van toepassing? Vertel van ’n tyd toe jy op hierdie waarheid staatgemaak het om jou deur ’n sekere situasie te dra.
5. Verduidelik hoekom Holly steeds in Los Angeles was jare nadat Alex haar verwerp het. Watter tekens was daar dat sy nie van hom vergeet het nie?
6. Was daar al ’n tyd in jou lewe wat jy in ’n sekere fase vasgevang was en jy nie kon aanbeweeg nie? Vertel van hierdie tyd en hoekom dit jou mismoedig gemaak het.
7. Wat het jy van eko-terroriste in hierdie boek geleer? Deel jou gedagtes oor hierdie nuwe kriminele fenomeen.
8. Dave Jacobs was ’n ontwikkelaar, maar hy was ook ’n voëlkyker en iemand wat vir die daklose gemeenskap in Los Angeles gesorg het. Wat het die lede van die ROA waarskynlik oor Dave Jacobs gedink? Hoekom is dit belangrik om bouers, omgewingsbewustes of enigiemand anders nie as stereotipes te sien nie?
9. Jamie wou desperaat die probleme in Alex se hart oplos. Wat moes sy op die ou einde doen om dit te sien gebeur?
10. Is daar mense in jou lewe wat jy graag sal wil help? Wys God vir jou hoe jy dit kan regkry? Wat voel jy wil Hy hê jy moet doen? Vertel van die situasie indien moontlik.
11. Wat het Clay bedoel toe hy die verskil tussen die boosheid buite en die boosheid in ’n persoon verduidelik het?
12. Lees Johannes 16 en bespreek wat die Bybel sê oor die boosheid in iemand en asook in die wêreld. Wat

is Christus se plan vir sy mense wanneer dit by hierdie kwessie kom?

13. Polisiehonde is gewoonlik baie lojaal, toon dapperheid en wil graag beskerm. Ken jy iemand wat met 'n polisiehond gewerk het? Vertel van hulle ondervinding.
14. In watter opsigte is ons verhouding met Jesus soos Alex se verhouding met Bo?
15. Baie mense het vir Alex gebid tydens hierdie moeilike en uitdagende tyd in sy lewe. Watter mense se gebede staan uit en het 'n verskil gemaak?
16. Vir wie bid jy op die oomblik? Waarop kan jy fokus wat jou sal aanmoedig om aan te hou bid? Vertel van 'n tyd toe 'n gebed in jou lewe beantwoord is nadat iemand lank vir jou gebid het.
17. Die tragedie van 11 September is vir baie Amerikaners iets van die verlede. Kinders wat nou in die hoërskool is, was dalk pas in die laerskool toe die terroriste-aanvalle plaasgevind het. Wat moet Amerikaners doen om nooit die verlies van daardie dag te vergeet nie?
18. Alex se pa se dood was altyd vir hom moeilik gewees. Maar toe hy met Holly getrou het, het hy besef die hartseer sal nie heeltyd 'n uitwerking op hom hê nie. Hy het die besluit geneem om die pyn net elke nou en dan te ervaar. Watter situasie in jou lewe moet jy ook eerder net elke nou en dan weer beleef?
19. Holly se ma het vir haar vertel dat ware liefde werk verg, dat dit nie meteens deel word van 'n persoon se lewe soos 'n helder reënboog op 'n mistroostige dag nie. Wat is jou gevoel ten opsigte van die liefde?

Verskeie tipes liefde is in hierdie boek geïllustreer. Bespreek 'n paar hiervan en verduidelik watter tipes liefde deel vorm van jou lewe.

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING ABOUT KAREN KINGSBURY'S BOOKS

Karen's book *Oceans Apart* changed my life. She has an amazing gift of bringing a reader into her stories. I can only pray she never stops writing.

Susan L.

Everyone should have the opportunity to read or listen to a book by Karen Kingsbury. It should be in the *Bill of Rights*.

Rachel S.

I want to thank Karen Kingsbury for what she is doing with the power of her storytelling — touching hearts like mine and letting God use her to change the world for Him.

Brittney N.

Karen Kingsbury's books are filled with the unshakable, remarkable, miraculous fact that God's grace is greater than our suffering. There are no words for Ms. Kingsbury's writing.

Wendie K.

Because I loaned these books to my mother, she BECAME a Chris tian! Thank you for a richer life here and in heaven!

Jennifer E.

When I read my first Karen Kingsbury book, I couldn't stop.... I read thirteen more in one summer!

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I have never read anything so uplifting and entertaining. I'm shocked as I read each new release because it's always better than the last one.

Bonnie S.

I am unable to put your books down, and I plan to read many more of them. What a wonderful spiritual message I find in each one!

Rhonda T.

I love the way Karen Kingsbury writes, and the topics she chooses to write about! Thank you so much for sharing your talent with us, your readers!

Barbara S.

My husband is equally hooked on your books. It is a family affair for us now! Can't wait for the next one.

Angie

I can't even begin to tell you what your books mean to me.... Thank you for your wonderful books and the way they touch my life again and again.

Martje L.

Every time our school buys your next new book, everybody goes crazy trying to read it first!

Roxanne

Recently I made an effort to find GOOD Chris tian writers, and I've hit the jackpot with Karen Kingsbury!

Linda

When Karen Kingsbury calls her books "Life-Changing Fiction™," she's merely telling the unvarnished truth. I'm still sorting through the changes in my life that have come from reading just a few of her books!

Robert M.

I must admit that I wish I was a much slower reader ... or you were a much faster writer. Either way, I can't seem to get enough of Karen Kingsbury's books!

Jillian B.

I was offered \$50 one time in the airport for the fourth book in the Redemption Series. The lady's husband just couldn't understand why I wasn't interested in selling it. Through sharing Karen's books with my friends, many have decided that contemporary Chris tian fiction is the next best thing to the Bible. Thank you so much, Karen. It is truly a God-thing that you write the way you do.

Sue Ellen H.

Karen Kingsbury's books have made me see things in ways that I had never thought about before. I have to force myself to put them down and come up for air!

Tabitha H.

I have read many of Karen's books and I cry with every one. I feel like I actually know the people in the story, and my heart goes out to all of them when something happens!

Kathy N.

Wow, what an amazing author Karen Kingsbury is! Her stories are so heart-wrenching ... I can't wait until the next book comes out.... Karen, please don't ever lay your pen down.

Nancy T.

Karen Kingsbury's words leap off the page.... I just finished a new series last night and once again she has touched me beyond compare!

Kendra S.

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Fame

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ZONDERVAN

Remember Tuesday Morning

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